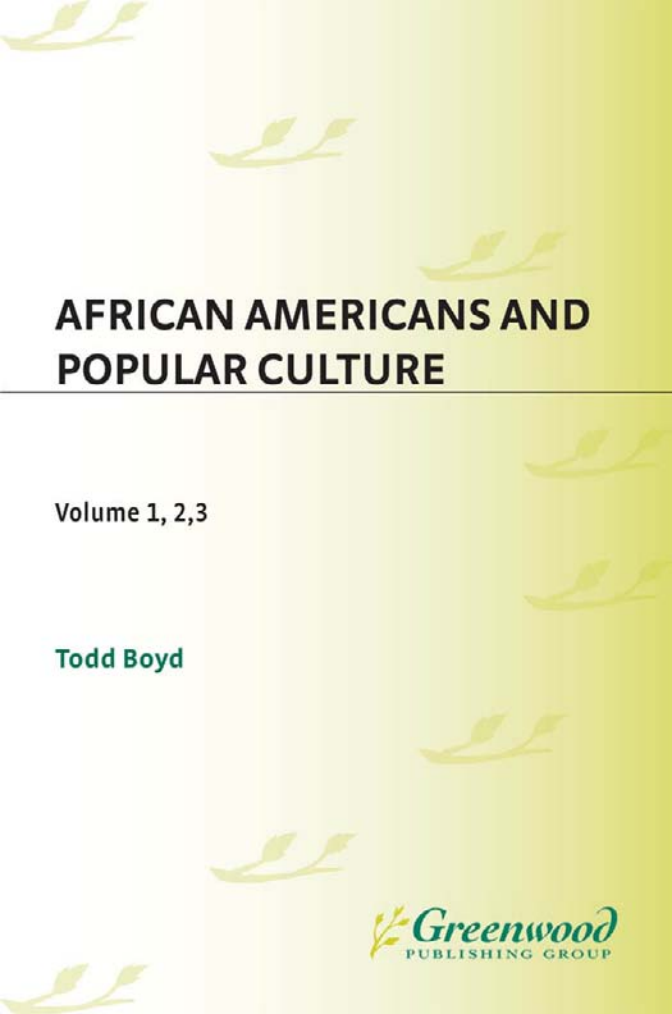


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# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POPULAR CULTURE**

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**Volume 1, 2,3**

**Todd Boyd**

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# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POPULAR CULTURE**

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# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POPULAR CULTURE**

**VOLUME I  
THEATER, FILM, AND TELEVISION**

**Edited by Todd Boyd**

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# Introduction

## AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

The argument can be made that it is in the broad area of popular culture that African Americans have had their greatest and most profound effects on American society. This is most certainly the case from the beginning of the twentieth century on. My intention is not to discount the role of the social and the political in contextualizing the African American experience, but to point out the overwhelming influence that popular culture has had in shaping the image of African Americans internally and in the larger society.

The relationship between African Americans and various forms of popular culture—such as music, sports, film, and television—is both complicated and congratulatory. Relative to this relationship is the way in which, over time, certain issues have evolved while other issues—such as the need for African Americans to control the means of cultural production, and the continued prevalence of certain stereotypes—in spite of the particular form of culture in question. Interestingly enough, these various forms of popular culture have often been written about and discussed exclusively of one another. I have long been a proponent of discussing these forms of culture as part and parcel of a larger body of work defined collectively as African American popular culture rather than limiting the influence of one form exclusively to its own domain. It makes sense that what is happening at a given time in film, for instance, may be influenced by what is taking place in the world of music. On the other hand, each medium requires that specific attention be paid to it in order to determine what is going on internally within that specific field of inquiry.

It is important to point out that in discussing popular culture, I am concerned with the culture consumed by “the people,” as it were. Some may find the exclusion of literature from these volumes to be an omission, but it is the point of view of this project that much has been written about literature but little penned about African American representation in less well-regarded genres such as comic books that nonetheless deserve our attention. In some ways, my distinctions are motivated by class concerns

that have often tended to exclude the “popular” in popular culture when celebrating those works that have animated discussions about African American identity over the years. This is not to dismiss the impact of a Langston Hughes or Toni Morrison as much as it is to recognize the fact that those watching a boxing match or a Blaxploitation film could indeed be excluded from discussions that might overlook such endeavors because of their overtly popular nature. It is this populist appeal that underscores the aim and scope of articles selected for this series of volumes.

For many years, African Americans were simply objects within popular culture whose representation tended to be quite stereotypical and especially problematic. At a certain point though, African Americans attempted to harness the means of production and create their own representations instead of being represented by others. This is the point at which things began to get interesting. For example, it is the utterly hideous and overtly racist representation of African Americans in a monumental film like D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) that creates the space for the beginning of an independent Black film movement, a movement that began with people such as Emmett J. Scott, Oscar Micheaux, and George and Nobel P. Johnson and continued up to such a prolific and contemporary mainstream figure as Spike Lee.

The tragedy and the triumph of African American imagery in popular culture is a situation where the two seemingly opposite poles are often interwoven. A good example of this can be found in the reasoning surrounding baseball player Jackie Robinson’s integration of Major League Baseball in 1947—the point here being that there would have been no need for Robinson to break the “color line” in baseball had there not been a policy of racial segregation instituted in the first place. As this example indicates, African Americans in popular culture have often found themselves operating somewhere between the reality of racism and the possibilities of redemption through cultural engagement.

To this end, the core of African American cultural expression has often been located in music, which is itself an extension of the oral tradition that has long defined the Black presence in American society. A discussion of American music is a discussion that must recognize the centrality of African American music in this context. To exclude African American music from this discussion ultimately means that no discussion can take place.

The various forms of Black music—from gospel and the blues to jazz, soul, and, more recently, hip-hop—have helped define the culture over time and have also provided a running soundtrack to American life. Black music, in the forms of blues and rhythm and blues, was the original source for what would eventually become “rock ’n’ roll,” a popular but derivative genre of music that went on to reach mainstream mass appeal—often at the expense of its Black roots. The everlasting influence of music has been

represented over time in phrases like “the Jazz Age,” the role of bebop in defining the “Beat Generation,” the place of both gospel music and Motown in the Civil Rights movement, and the transformation of American culture brought by hip hop in contemporary society, among many other examples. The joys and pain, the triumphs and tribulations—all have been expressed both in and by the music. A list of social, political, and economic issues have been uniquely represented by the various sounds that emerge from the oral tradition. The music has served to inspire, inform, soothe, and enrage all those who might choose to listen, as well as all those preferring to ignore what was going on but unable to get away from the prevalence of the particular music in question. The role of Black radio at various points in history has helped to spread this music while also serving as an important nexus between the culture and the community in the process. Black music is a life force as well as a source of history, and the influence of this music has been felt throughout the culture.

If music represents the heart and soul of Black popular culture, sports represents the body itself. The success and struggles of African Americans in sports helps provide a physical example of the long, arduous journey that Black people have traveled over time in America. From once being excluded from certain sporting activities to now being the standard by which others measure their success, Black athletes have served a vital role in pushing the social and political boundaries that have often limited Black advancement in society.

The success of such a great boxer as Joe Louis and such a great sprinter as Jesse Owens helped solidify America’s image and position in the world during the lead-up to World War II. Yet neither of these figures was afforded the treatment of a first-class citizen after their athletic success was no longer needed for the country’s uplift. The aforementioned Jackie Robinson was successful at integrating baseball well before the public schools were desegregated and before the Civil Rights movement had gained national attention. Some might even call this “Act One” of what would become the Civil Rights movement, helping to bring attention to the push for social justice on a national stage in an otherwise unjust society.

There is perhaps no better example of the shift in attitude about Black athletes in America than the saga of Muhammad Ali. The gentleman originally known as Cassius Clay was one of the most hated Americans in the turbulent 1960s because of his membership in the controversial Nation of Islam, and especially because of his refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam War. Ali was stripped of his title, his passport was taken, and his ability to make a living was seriously denied based on such actions. Over time, however, Ali prevailed in the courts and in the ring as well. Eventually his triumphant story caused a new generation to begin reconsidering his legacy in the 1990s—so much so that he is often considered one of America’s

## x Introduction

greatest heroes and most influential icons in the present. Yet, for many African Americans, Ali was always a hero who stood up for what he believed, who spoke his mind, and who used his status as a prominent athlete to push for social change.

Since the heyday of Ali in the 1960s and 1970s, Black athletes have transcended new heights, becoming successful corporate sponsors and cultural icons of the highest order. This transition is best exemplified by Michael Jordan, whose incredible skill set and success as a basketball player was his passport to an unprecedented reign as a global sports and cultural icon in the 1980s and 1990s. In his time, Jordan was embraced across the racial spectrum, but there were also many African Americans who felt that Jordan should have used his position to further political issues as Ali had done before him. But Jordan was of a different era and generation from Ali. His across-the-board appeal and monumental success set new standards for Black athletes and the role of athletics in the larger society. Figures like Jordan help make sports an integral area of popular culture, their images moving freely through so many different areas within the culture itself.

In contemporary society, some African Americans entrepreneurs now occupy places in the sports world other than just participating as athletes—for example, figures like Robert Johnson, founder of the BET network and the owner of the NBA's Charlotte Bobcats. Johnson's success demonstrates the link between entertainment and sports, thus fully foregrounding the importance of popular culture as a vehicle, as well as the upward mobility of African Americans now having a hand in the ownership of teams, as opposed to simply being players. The presence of a prominent figure from the hip-hop world, such as mogul Jay-Z, who owns portions of the New Jersey Nets, is but another example of the link between various spheres of popular culture and the existence of those who now have enough resources to be capital investors as well. Many African Americans have also moved into the executive suites of various teams and assume the roles of managers and coaches as well. Though there is still a lot of room to grow in terms of full Black participation in all levels of the sporting world, progress has been made since the racially problematic days of Owens, Louis, and Robinson.

In the worlds of film and television, African Americans have fared somewhat less well than their counterparts in music and sports, although the presence of African Americans in these venues has been something of note throughout the history of both. The visibility and influence of media has meant a constant struggle over issues of representation as it pertains to African Americans. In addition to the afore mentioned Micheaux and his fledgling efforts as an independent filmmaker, other African Americans such as Spencer Williams and, later, Melvin Van Peebles used the screen as a way of representing their own version of Black life in America. Van

Peebles and his provocative work *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) took the notion of independent cinema to uncharted territory with a stunning political critique that spoke to the sentiment of many people invested in the ideology of Black nationalism. The film represented a moment when culture and politics tended to work hand in hand. Hollywood took its cue from Van Peebles's critical and financial success and began what came to be known as the Blaxploitation movement, which defined Black presence in the 1970s. For the first time, cinema assumed a unique position among other aspects of Black culture in which visual representation came to be debated for its central role in defining African Americans relative to the larger society.

In 1986 filmmaker Spike Lee released his debut feature *She's Gotta Have It* and in so doing revived the Black independent film movement. Lee, with his shrewd marketing skills, tapped into the emerging sentiment of hip-hop culture and went on to redefine what it meant to be a Black filmmaker, managing to get his films made by the mainstream Hollywood studio system and maintain his own unique style at the same time. After Lee's success, several other young Black filmmakers—Robert Townsend, Reginald and Warrington Hudlin, John Singleton, and Allen and Albert Hughes, among others—began making their own way into Hollywood, turning the late 1980s and early 1990s into an extremely fertile period for African American images on film.

In addition to African American filmmakers attempting to control the means of production, the overall image of African Americans in Hollywood has long been an issue. Demeaning stereotypes often accompanied actors such as Stepin Fetchit and Hattie McDaniels in the 1930s, but an actor such as Sidney Poitier enjoyed groundbreaking success in the 1960s. In more recent times, Denzel Washington's critically acclaimed performances have garnered Oscars and the financial clout of Will Smith has made a mark on box-office proceeds. The historical evolution of the African American image in Hollywood is a journey filled with peaks and valleys, often defining by promises of inclusion set against a tradition of exclusion.

To the extent that African Americans in film have been defined by a conflicted history, something similar can be said about the role that African Americans have played on television. African Americans on film and in television have functioned differently from those in sports or music. Issues of representation, especially pertaining to stereotypes, for instance, continue to animate discussions about both film and television; yet the desire for dramas about African Americans on television has been the consistent cry as well. Many regard television's focus on Black situation comedies limiting and especially problematic. Though African Americans have long used stand-up comedy as an effective forum for the dissection of racial politics, the limitations inherent to confining Black television representation

primarily to the genre of the situation comedy remains in question. Here the focus is on genre. Comedies have often tended to feature Black performers in roles that are taken less than seriously, thus the desire to see a broader palette for African American images remains a demand put forth by the offended party.

For African Americans on television, Bill Cosby tends to function in a manner similar to Sidney Poitier on film. Bill Cosby made a name for himself as the first African American in a starring role on television with *I Spy* in the 1960s, his animated cartoon *Fat Albert* in 1970s, and his mega-hit *The Cosby Show*, which dominated 1980s network television, revived the sitcom, and became in the process one of the most important television programs ever. Since that time though, much discussion has taken place about what was not being represented on television—rather than what was.

The 1970s also featured several prominent African American sitcoms, including *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. *The Flip Wilson Show*, an hour-long variety show, revolved around the many personas of comic Flip Wilson. The ground breaking miniseries *Roots* was another landmark television event during this decade. Based on the best-selling book by Alex Haley, *Roots* unfolded over seven nights in 1977 and traced the history of Haley's family from its African roots to its enslavement in America and the resulting aftermath. This popular narrative exposed many Americans to the horrors of slavery for the first time and also sparked an interest in genealogy as people from all races became interested in tracing their own roots. In the 1960s, television played a vital role in broadcasting the pivotal moments of the Civil Rights movement, and the 1970s inaugurated a fertile period for Black representation on television. Since that time, some might say that little has changed in these representations, even though the landscape of television has broadened substantially since then.

The proliferation of cable ushered in the era of Black Entertainment Television (BET), a network originally owned by Robert Johnson. This all-Black cable channel, long controversial for its heavy emphasis on hip-hop music videos, infomercials, and religious programming, was the result of Johnson's strategy of maximizing profit, though many of his critics felt that the network should be a venue for education, filling in the blanks left by the exclusion of African American representation on other networks. More recently, the cable network TV1 debuted in 2004, part of the media empire of Cathy Hughes, a prominent and successful African American woman who also owns the radio conglomerate Radio One.

One of the most significant figures in the history of television has been Oprah Winfrey. As an African American woman, Winfrey developed a massive following from the mid-1980s forward based on her extremely popular television program; from this, she has branched out into other areas of the culture—film, magazines, theater—creating a pervasive brand name that

has few peers throughout the larger history of American popular culture. Winfrey's popularity has been so broad-based that she decided to use her weighty mass appeal to endorse and campaign for Illinois senator Barack Obama in his historic quest for the presidency in 2008.

To the extent that popular culture is produced and consumed, its ability to reach the hearts and minds of common people is illuminating. To trace the history of African Americans through the twentieth century is to observe the drama, comedy, politics, and soul of Black cultural expression. When focusing on several difference modes of representation, from early silent film to theater and from the Delta blues to hip-hop and beyond the breadth and depth of the Black experience is evident in all its attendant celebration and controversy. The contents of these volumes cut across medium, genre, and style to be both focused and eclectic. It is in the accumulation of these individual parts as a whole that we may begin to recognize the many common themes that animate this uniquely American set of circumstances, located deep within the African American existence.

*Dr. Todd Boyd*  
May, 2008  
Los Angeles, CA

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# The Politics of Representation in African American Theater and Drama

*Brandi Wilkins Catanese*

Because African Americans were first brought to the United States under involuntary conditions, they have been engaged in a long-standing struggle to define themselves independently of the social, political, and economic motives of the dominant U.S. culture. This desire for self-definition becomes especially important within the realms of art and culture because mainstream society has long used the arts—including music, visual culture, theater, film, and television—to offer unflattering images of blacks, images that would validate the poor treatment of blacks within American society. Therefore, any discussion of African American theater and drama must include a specific focus on the politics of representation, or the sociopolitical influence and impact that images of black people have within society. Especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when reality television is one of the most popular categories of programming, many American audiences believe that television and film, in particular, offer fully accurate representations of the various ethnic and racial groups in society. As easily distributable electronic media, television and film have this power today, but theater and drama used to be just as influential over American attitudes, and they continue to offer powerful narratives and images of black life. Therefore African American drama—past and present—must always position itself against the reductive stereotypes found elsewhere in American culture. African American theater and drama are forms of cultural resistance, both to the frequent misrepresentation of blacks within mass culture and to the political and aesthetic values of the dominant culture. In form, content, and context, African American theater offers the chance to redefine black life and black culture in ways that affirm the people whom it represents. This essay provides an overview

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of African American theater and drama that focuses on key artistic movements from the era of slavery to the present day.

### THE EARLY YEARS: SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND BLACK PERFORMANCE

In 1821, William Alexander Brown (exact dates unknown) founded the first African American theater company, the African Theater, in New York City. Its first production was William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Performing the works of Shakespeare was a bold move on the part of the African Theater because, by doing so, Brown and his actors were laying claim to some of the most revered work in the canon of Western literature at a time when it was still illegal for enslaved blacks to be taught to read. The content (Shakespeare) and the context (a newly formed black theater that rejected white theaters' second-class treatment of blacks) of the African Theater's performances worked to disprove claims of black ignorance and lack of sophistication. Brown's daring was ironically rewarded: African Theater performances gained enough popularity among white New Yorkers that Brown was forced to create a segregated seating area for them at the back of his theater.<sup>1</sup>

#### William H. West's Big Minstrel Jubilee



In some ways, this popularity contributed to the African Theater's demise: Brown was only able to sustain the company for three years, until 1824, because of pressures from people who were hostile to Brown's success. A rival white theater producer, Stephen Price, was allegedly able to get both police and unscrupulous white citizens to sabotage African Theater performances by heckling at shows, assaulting performers, and breaking up performances to arrest the actors.<sup>2</sup> Segregation was not enough for Price and others like him; they insisted on pronounced black inequality as well. Nevertheless, before the African Theater disbanded, William Alexander Brown made several very important contributions to black theater history: in addition to producing the works of Shakespeare and other European authors, Brown penned what is credited as being the first play by a black American author: *The Drama of King Shotaway* (1823). Although no copies of this play have survived to the present, it is known to have told the story of the Second Carib War of 1795–1796 and is supposedly based on Brown's own observations and experiences in the British and French colonial territory of St. Vincent. In addition to this literary milestone, Brown also helped foster an important category of performer: the black Shakespearean actor. Two of Brown's actors, James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge, achieved particular acclaim.

James Hewlett (exact dates unknown) was an ambitious and talented performer who worked with Brown in the African Theater and was best known for his Shakespearean work. Hewlett was confident enough to advertise himself as an actor in the tradition of Edmund Kean, comparing himself to the white nineteenth-century English actor who was celebrated as one of the greatest Shakespeareans of his time. After the African Theater disbanded, Hewlett continued to travel and perform internationally, but he faded into obscurity shortly thereafter. On the other hand, Ira Aldridge (1807–1867), who as a youngster seems to have apprenticed with the African Theater, surpassed Hewlett's brief career to become one of the most acclaimed actors in American theater history.<sup>3</sup> Black and white audiences alike celebrated his performances as Othello, Shakespeare's most famous black character. According to reviews from the time, Aldridge disappeared into the role so completely that he enabled audiences to find sympathy with this deeply flawed character. In doing so, he also encouraged nineteenth-century theatergoers to recognize the connections between Othello's oppression and that faced by blacks in their own time. Just as Othello was an exile from his homeland, Aldridge was too: he left the United States as a teenager, when it became clear that he would have only limited opportunities to use his talents here, and instead performed throughout Europe for decades to great acclaim. Unfortunately, Aldridge died in Poland before he had the chance to return to America and perform for appreciative audiences here. Ira Aldridge and James Hewlett were

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not the only black Shakespeareans of the nineteenth century, but their fates were typical of the time: in spite of the resistance to racist attitudes that these men literally enacted with their performances, America had no place for what they represented, either onstage or off, and they never received the respect that they deserved within this country.

Although Brown's African Theater did much to demonstrate the resourcefulness and skill of black theater producers and performers, it offers but a partial perspective on black performance in the nineteenth century. Although Brown and his associates performed throughout the North as free men and women, in the southern United States African Americans were still being exploited as slaves, although, by the 1830s, the abolitionist movement had gained significant momentum and visibility. Both advocates and opponents of slavery used theater to support their cause and spread their views about race relations in America. Perhaps the most famous work of abolitionist theater created by an African American was William Wells Brown's *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom* (1856). Brown was himself an escaped slave who, much like black leader Frederick Douglass, used his oratorical skills to lecture in support of the abolitionist movement. Through his eloquent speech and the content of his writings, Brown demonstrated the intellectual and moral capacity of blacks that existed in spite of the limitations imposed by slavery. More important, Brown chose to transform his testimony about enslaved life from the traditional form of the slave narrative to the form of drama, which allowed for a more detailed depiction of the varied characters who populated plantation society.

*The Escape* is based, according to Wells Brown, on the true story of a pair of betrothed slaves who escaped to Canada and, in turn, helped other enslaved blacks to do the same. The play has comic as well as dramatic moments and alternates between showing scenes of typical slave relationships, scenes that focus specifically on the relationship of the young lovers plotting their escape, and scenes that depict the hypocrisy of white Christian slaveholders. Wells Brown performed *The Escape* as a solo piece, allowing him to impersonate the wide range of characters that the play depicted. This allowed him to include stereotypes of uneducated slaves and to contrast them with representations of blacks who possessed all of the traits that whites refused to recognize in them.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, *The Escape* allowed Wells Brown to use humor both to mock and to criticize white slaveholders for their faults. Ultimately, the content of the play and Wells Brown's performance of it combined to prove that descriptions of the races were backward: the whites who held slaves were immoral and undeserving of special status within American society, whereas the blacks who were enslaved possessed true moral integrity and deserved the freedoms and protections that whites denied them.

If plays such as *The Escape* helped the abolitionist movement, blackface minstrelsy staged and reinforced the negative attitudes about blacks that were both the rationale for slavery and the motivation for the post-emancipation backlash against Reconstruction. Minstrelsy was one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment in nineteenth-century America. It remains the single most powerful source of the negative stereotypes of African Americans that continue to influence entertainment, advertising, news reporting, and even voting patterns. Actually a Northern phenomenon, minstrelsy initially catered to an audience of young, white, working-class males, giving them the opportunity to laugh at blacks as people whose race made them irredeemably inferior. The first minstrel performers were white men who blackened their faces with a burnt cork paste, painted on exaggerated features, and supposedly imitated black music and dance. Minstrel shows generally had a three-act structure, beginning with songs, dancing, and jokes—mediated by a performer called the “interlocutor” who was not in blackface, serving as the straight man for the blackface actors. After this opening section came the “olio,” in which an actor would—using “darker” dialect—deliver a lecture mocking various types of people by whom white working-class male audiences would feel threatened, such as blacks who were their competition in the labor market, female suffragists, and the white professional class. The final section of the minstrel show featured a brief play, which provided yet another opportunity to mock blacks and their desire for social equality. Popular characters that emerged from these third-act sketches include Zip Coon, Jim Dandy, and Jim Crow, a pitiable figure whose name eventually became the symbol of the legally segregated culture of the southern United States.<sup>5</sup>

The first famous blackface performer, Thomas “Daddy” Rice (1808–1860), told audiences that he invented the Jim Crow dance after seeing an elderly black man on a slave plantation attempting to move gracefully. Rice’s claim of authenticity became a common theme for white performers, as the name of the first commercial minstrel troupe confirms: when the Virginia Minstrels appeared in 1843 in New York City, they chose their name to suggest that their performances were based on observations of actual black behaviors in the South. Prior to their show, minstrels were usually the opening acts for other types of performances, so the transition to featured performance was indicative of the genre’s increased popularity. Both before and after the Civil War, minstrel shows not only offered a glimpse into the supposed music and dance practices of blacks, but also aimed to demonstrate that slavery was a benevolent institution that served blacks’ best interests. After emancipation, some minstrel plays showed blacks making a mess of their freedom or reflecting nostalgically on the time when whites looked after them and made their lives easy. Regardless of specific subject matter, what most minstrel shows had in common was

## 6 Theater, Film, and Television

their interest in making blacks look as ridiculous as possible in order to demonstrate that they were not suited to full citizenship within American society.<sup>6</sup>

The power of blackface stereotypes cannot be underestimated. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851–1852, 1853) began as an abolitionist serial that was consolidated and published as a novel, but when it was adapted for the stage—against her wishes—its already imperfect depictions of naïve, enslaved blacks and noble whites were grossly distorted, and the antislavery message was completely removed, even reversed, to prove that blacks neither deserved nor understood how to handle their freedom.<sup>7</sup> In this debased form, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became one of the most popular stage shows of the nineteenth century and offered Uncle Tom and Topsy, in particular, as comic evidence of blacks' subservience and inferiority to whites. Most productions featured white performers in blackface, although Sam Lucas (1840?–1916) eventually earned the distinction of becoming the first black actor to play Uncle Tom, both onstage and in film. Through productions such as this, white performers in blackface inserted themselves into the history of black performance: by controlling the content and context that represented blacks to the American public, they created and validated their misrepresentations of black Americans, making it impossible for their audiences to view blacks as equals.

Clearly, insecurity and hostility to the effect that black freedom had on white privilege gave power to these negative stereotypes, but the racial politics of minstrelsy are far more complicated. First, some scholars suggest that minstrelsy not only demonstrated the hostility that whites had for blacks, but also proved whites' deep but grudging admiration and fascination with black culture.<sup>8</sup> Performing in blackface gave white actors temporary permission to leave behind the pressures of respectability that were usually attached to whiteness. Blackface minstrels could tell sexual jokes and sing and dance freely—as long as they pretended to mock the culture that they were actually embracing—specifically because they could walk away from the negative connotations of blackness when they left the stage and removed their makeup. Furthermore, minstrel performance became a way for European immigrants to assert their membership in the racial majority. In some ways, it served as a double ritual: because minstrelsy relied on culturally specific humor, European immigrants proved their understanding and acceptance of the cultural values that made blacks objects of ridicule, and, because of the reductive black and white binary that blackface relied on, immigrant performers danced and sang their way into the whiteness underneath the burnt cork masks of minstrelsy. In particular, minstrelsy seems to have been a popular occupation for Irish immigrants, who often lived alongside blacks in marginalized communities in

the North. Their social access to blacks offered the “authentic” source material for their performances, and the disavowal of blackness embedded in the performances helped these Irish performers make the transition from Irish to American at a time when “American” meant whiteness and the rejection of blackness.<sup>9</sup>

However, the rigid distinction between blackness and whiteness that minstrelsy seemed to stage was not complete. For example, dance scholars recognize that the black dances that white performers imitated were themselves hybrid forms, a combination of African-based movements and European dances such as the Irish jig.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, even though it is absolutely correct to condemn blackface minstrelsy as an insult to black Americans, it is important to recognize that, by the 1860s, minstrel troupes comprised of black performers also donned blackface makeup and performed throughout the country. They were seen as hyperauthentic performers, and white audiences eagerly watched their performances, believing them to be undiluted and unmodified expressions of black culture. Black performers tried to exert control over the roles that they assumed in these shows, eschewing whenever possible the dark stereotypes and the nostalgia for slavery that characterized white minstrel shows. Even within the degraded space of the minstrel stage, black performers engaged in resistance to the most harmful representations of blackness that were created in white performance venues. Some scholars further suggest that black-on-black minstrelsy was a powerful act of subversion—through which black performers neutralized white racist efforts to laugh at them. The black performers achieved this subversion by controlling the narratives at which whites could laugh and by embedding in their shows, under the guise of the fool, very stringent critiques of American racism. These critiques would be understood by black audience members and, perhaps, by astute whites who recognized the blacks’ intelligence beneath the burnt cork masks.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy was well on the decline; some black performers continued calling themselves minstrel troupes but began shifting their performance to diminish the reliance on old performance styles. Instead, this was the beginning of a profitable era, in which many black performers (usually supported by white producers) embraced the new vaudeville format, appearing in full-length musical reviews such as *Black America* (1895), its competitor *Darkest America* (1896), and *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk* (1897). Many black artists and intellectuals from other arenas, such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and W. E. B. Du Bois created works for the theater, recognizing the tremendous opportunity that blacks had to use art to rehabilitate their reputations in the eyes of mainstream society. If whites could use minstrelsy to denigrate black culture, leading black artists could use

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performance to elevate black culture. However, the mechanisms for sharing these alternate visions of black life were limited: blacks were largely excluded from the primary actors unions of the time and belonged to separate organizations, such as the Southern Consolidated Circuit and the Theater Owners' Booking Association, which was informally known as the "Chitlin' Circuit" of performance tours that were often inferior. These unions helped black actors book shows but did not always protect them from exploitative working conditions, crooked business deals, or lack of payment.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, Bert Williams (1874–1922) became one of the greatest black performers in American theater history. A magnificent singer, dancer, and actor, Williams continued wearing the mask of blackface long after other performers, including his partner, had ceased the practice. He partnered with George Walker (1873–1911) to form the comic duo Williams & Walker, which eventually expanded to include their wives, Ada (later Aida) Overton Walker (1880–1914), an accomplished dancer and choreographer, and Lottie Williams. Williams and Walker successfully made the transition from vaudeville shows to full-length musical productions such as *In Dahomey* (1902) and *Abyssinia* (1906). In addition to their success onstage, Williams and Walker are recognized as the first black recording artists to work with a professional label. Williams continued recording independent of Walker throughout his career. Their performance partnership ended prematurely when George Walker fell ill and passed away, but Williams remained on the stage, eventually becoming the first black performer to appear in the famous *Ziegfeld Follies*, where he flirted with social taboos by occasionally sharing the stage with the white female performers known as Ziegfeld girls. Williams's life as a history-making performer demonstrated the power and appeal of black expressive culture while also exposing the limitations that black entertainers endured during this period of institutionalized segregation and inequality.

### THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY: THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND BEYOND

After the interlude of black musical theater, which formed a bridge from minstrelsy into the twentieth century, the next significant artistic movement was the Harlem Renaissance. It might be more accurate to refer to the Harlem Renaissance as the first comprehensive movement of African American artists and intellectuals in theater history. In minstrelsy and even in the era of turn-of-the-century musical theater, black artists usually worked under white control, within existing performance structures, and tried to amend these structures to suit their purposes. The Harlem Renaissance was unique because of the opportunity that black artists had to work both within and outside existing theatrical structures. Not only did



black artists make advances on Broadway and receive individualized support for their art from wealthy white patrons, but they also developed community-based institutions to nurture emerging black talent. Although there is some disagreement about dates, the Harlem Renaissance generally encompasses the period between World War I and World War II, curtailed on the latter end by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Even before the interwar period, African American actors had achieved a significant milestone: the 1917 premiere of Ridgley Torrence's (1875–1950) *Three Plays for a Negro Theater* brought the first all-black cast to Broadway.<sup>12</sup> Although Torrence was a white author, black leaders and critics celebrated the production as a breakthrough in the way that blacks were depicted onstage. Torrence's three one-act plays, *The Rider of Dreams*, *Simon, the Cyrenian*, and *Granny Maumee*, aspired to offer diverse portraits of black life instead of comic stereotypes. Unfortunately, the production closed after a disappointingly short one-month run, and national anxiety about America's entry into World War I overshadowed what might otherwise have been a watershed moment in the history of black actors on Broadway. Nevertheless, in 1923, Willis Richardson (1889–1977) became the first black author to have his theatrical work, *The Chipwoman's Fortune*, presented on Broadway. Both of these productions reflected the general sense during this period in New York that black culture was in vogue; whites rushed to Harlem to hear the latest music and learn the latest dances at revues such as the Cotton Club. The smash Broadway musical *Shuffle Along* (1921) also rose to success during this period, with music and lyrics by Eubie Blake (1883–1983) and Noble Sissle (1889–1975), and helped launch the career of Josephine Baker (1906–1975), who was a chorus girl in the show.

A debate between two leading figures of the black intelligentsia summarizes the accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had already demonstrated his interest in theater by writing the black history pageant *Star of Ethiopia* (1913). He also used his position as editor of the organization's magazine, *Crisis*, to initiate a playwriting contest, a move paralleled by Charles Johnson, editor of the Urban League's *Opportunity*. This interest in theater led to the creation of many works by significant figures in the history of black dramatic literature, such as Eulalie Spence (1894–1981; *The Fool's Errand*, 1927), Marita Bonner (1898–1971; *The Purple Flower*, 1928), and Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960; *Color Struck*, 1925). As an extension of these efforts to cultivate and reward emerging artists, in 1926 the NAACP organized the KRIGWA Players Little Negro Theater (originally CRIGWA, for Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists), a New York-based theatrical company that lasted for three years and produced award-winning plays from its contests. The declaration of purpose for this production guild, aligned with Du Bois's

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politics, identified four criteria for negro art: that it be written and performed by black artists, about black experience, written for blacks rather than whites as the primary audience, and produced in theaters near blacks, rather than far away in the main theater district.<sup>13</sup> Du Bois was adamant that blacks realize theater's potential as a valuable political tool: rather than pretending that white theater was neutral art and not propaganda, blacks should recognize the potential that they, too, had to educate and organize their community through the representational arts.<sup>14</sup> Langston Hughes (1902–1967) shared Du Bois's conviction that blacks should write for and to themselves, and he condemned artists and audiences who believed that black art should in any way imitate white art or depend on white approval rather than celebrating the experiences of the common folk, including jazz and blues rather than opera and classical music.<sup>15</sup> Hughes's plays include *Mulatto* (1935) and *Mule Bone* (1931), his tempestuous collaboration with Zora Neale Hurston.

Alain Locke (1886–1954), a professor of philosophy at Howard University, disagreed with Du Bois's emphasis on polemical drama. Locke believed that employing theater explicitly as a protest vehicle, rather than as an art form, yielded shoddy plays that did nothing to elevate black culture in the eyes of either the black community or the mainstream. In 1925 Locke edited and contributed to a collection of essays and creative materials entitled *The New Negro*, which laid out an agenda for racial uplift with an emphasis on the arts.<sup>16</sup> According to Locke, the "New Negro" defined himself, whereas the "Old Negro" was a figment of whites' imagination rather than an accurate reflection of how the black person understood himself. The New Negro also took his place on the world stage by offering noble depictions of folk culture and celebrating the Africanist traditions and influences that made black American culture unique. Locke was uniquely poised to make these claims in the 1920s because the Africanist influence on Picasso and other modernist visual artists had been widely praised by this time. Therefore Locke's New Negro was connected as much to the folk traditions of yesteryear as to the high modernist movement of the mainstream. When it became clear that Locke's and Du Bois's philosophical differences were great enough to yield very different artistic agendas, Locke suggested that his Washington, D.C., campus's theater group, the Howard Players, which had been established in 1911, become the vehicle through which a national black theater—full of skilled actors, directors, designers, and authors—could be cultivated. The Howard Players's ambitions also demonstrate the geographic reach of artistic activity during the period: despite the name Harlem Renaissance, important work occurred in many places besides New York.

The KRIGWA Players and the Howard Players, together with organizations such as the Harlem Experimental Theater, the Lafayette Players, and the Dumas (later the Gilpin) Players (in Cleveland, Ohio) were part of the

Little (or Art) Theater Movement that also affected mainstream theater of the period. Little Theater practitioners wanted the freedom to experiment with new dramatic forms and to resist the commercial mandates of Broadway. For example, celebrated white playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953), working with the Provincetown Players, wrote *The Emperor Jones*, which appeared on Broadway in 1920, giving a substantial, though controversial, leading role to black actor Charles Gilpin (1878–1930) and, eventually, Paul Robeson (1898–1976). Black Little Theaters were intimately connected to public service agendas. Authors wrote works that addressed concerns specific to the black community: the conflict between rural Southern and urban Northern culture that the Great Migration had exacerbated, the cycle of poverty that discrimination and poor education inflicted on black communities in the North and the South, and, especially, the problem of lynching.<sup>17</sup> Even though two of the most prominent black Little Theaters were led or influenced by men, black women were quite involved in their day-to-day operations, serving as playwrights and performers.

Black women's influence on the Little Theaters of the Harlem Renaissance was most apparent in the content of the plays. Not only did black women playwrights address issues that affected women specifically, such as women's voting and reproductive rights, they also addressed lynching, which was a problem that affected the entire community. Most lynching victims were men, but black women playwrights attempted to demonstrate that lynching not only killed individuals, its aftermath also destroyed families and communities as well. For example, Angelina Weld Grimké (1880–1958) wrote *Rachel* in 1916 as an appeal to white women to recognize motherhood as a bond that they shared with black women. Lynching, Grimké argued, denied black women the joyful experience of motherhood to which they were entitled, by forcing them to worry for the safety of their husbands and offspring. Grimké believed that if she could reach white women on an emotional level, they too could become anti-lynching advocates: they could then appeal to their husbands and sons to stop perpetrating violence against the black community. Activism played a key part in black women's theatrical endeavors, but not all playwrights aspired to create explicitly political work: Eulalie Spence, for example, was quite adamant that underdeveloped, melodramatic plays would kill rather than nurture black theater, and she appealed to writers to remember their sense of humor when they set out to create new work.<sup>18</sup>

During the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the entire country entered the Great Depression, during which the government launched the Federal Theater Project (FTP, 1935–1939); this was the only time that the United States had a national theater. FTP units were, by default, most often segregated, but they generated several important productions: Theodore Ward (1902–1983) wrote *Big White Fog* (Chicago unit, 1938) in order to assess

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the impacts of Garveyism and socialism on the black community; Orson Welles directed a black adaptation of *Macbeth*, set in Haiti, which has come to be known informally as “Voodoo Macbeth” (New York unit, 1936); the internationally successful musical, *The Swing Mikado* (Chicago unit, 1938), synco-pated Gilbert and Sullivan’s original *The Mikado*; and Theodore Browne’s *Natural Man* (Seattle unit, 1937) told the story of folk legend John Henry.<sup>19</sup>

Scene from *Othello* with Paul Robeson and Margaret Webster, 1943–1944.



Library of Congress

Diana Sands (as Beneatha Younger) and Sidney Poitier (as Walter Lee Younger) in *A Raisin in the Sun*, 1959–1960.



Photofest

The advent of World War II induced something of a lull in high-profile black theater productions, with a few notable exceptions, including the 1940 establishment of the American Negro Theater and its 1944 production of *Anna Lucasta*; Paul Green's 1941 adaptation for the stage of Richard Wright's *Native Son*; the Broadway musical *Carmen Jones* (1943); and Paul Robeson's 1945 performance as the first black actor to take the leading role in *Othello* on Broadway. In the 1950s, despite McCarthyism's negative effects on the arts, black playwrights continued to tell stories that stressed the fundamental decency of black people, particularly in the face of American racism. In 1953 Louis Peterson (1922–1998) wrote *Take a Giant Step*, a play about a black teenager's difficult coming of age in an integrated community. In 1956 Alice Childress (1916–1994) was the first black woman to receive an Obie Award (given for plays produced in Off-Broadway houses), for her play attacking stereotypes in the theater, *Trouble in Mind*. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) became the first black woman playwright to have a show on Broadway: *A Raisin in the Sun* played to enthusiastic and appreciative audiences, with Lloyd Richards (1919–2006) as its

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director and a cast that included Sidney Poitier (1927–), Louis Gossett (1936–), Ruby Dee (1924–), and Diana Sands (1934–1973). *Raisin* tells the story of the multigenerational Younger family and their quest to move out of their urban tenement into a suburban home in a segregated community. Frustrated but unbowed by white racism, the Youngers prepare, at the play's end, to become the only black family on their block. At the time of its original production, the play achieved crossover success because white audiences recognized similarity in the black family's struggles to provide a better life for their children, and, more important, because it seemed to document the effects of racism on the Younger family without offering an angry polemic against whites. In other words, *Raisin* did not feel like propaganda. Although such a reading of Hansberry's play is understandable and certainly expedient in the different racial climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s, in reality, *Raisin* was far more complex, addressing such varied issues as women's educational opportunities and reproductive rights, America's exploitation of working-class black labor, and transnational solidarity between African Americans and recently expatriated Africans in America. The play remains popular today and recently enjoyed a Tony Award-winning revival on Broadway in 2004. In addition to its continued attractiveness as a performance piece, *Raisin* has undergone a critical reappraisal: scholars and activists alike recognize that earlier criticisms of the play as a tame assimilationist tract were incorrect.<sup>20</sup>

### SELF-DETERMINATION: THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT TO THE PRESENT

In 1968 Larry Neal (1937–1981) published the essay, "The Black Arts Movement," in which he described a new type of theater that broke with the middle-class respectability of past decades. Connected to the agenda of the Black Power Movement rather than to the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement encouraged black artists and everyday people to adopt a new way of looking at the world, through a black aesthetic that was fundamentally opposite to a white, European American aesthetic. Neal famously claimed that "ethics and aesthetics are one," suggesting that creating art was a political act and that a revolution in consciousness could come through changing the way that people saw themselves.<sup>21</sup> Linking ethics and aesthetics began with seeing black as beautiful and allowing that sense of beauty to determine the type of plays, poems, and novels that authors wrote, the type of music that artists made and audiences danced to, and even one's personal style.

The Black Arts Movement marked an important shift in the politics of representation within black drama. The movement emphatically rejected both respectability and protest as effective dramatic tactics for black empowerment, because they implicitly made white people and white values

the point of reference for black identity and prosperity. Instead of appealing to whites—by proving that blacks could be as moral as they were—or relying on white audiences to be moved to action by evidence of their wrongdoing, the Black Arts Movement was part of a larger project of self-determination, through which black values and black morals—separate from those of whites—set the agenda for improving the black community. Many plays from earlier eras had also been directed primarily at the black community, but their messages were comprehensible and palatable to white audiences because they demonstrated that blacks embraced mainstream American values. Many of the authors working within the Black Arts Movement wrote plays that were incomprehensible to white audiences, either because they explicitly rejected mainstream American values or because they drew on non-Western aesthetics and narrative styles. Therefore, the sociopolitical influence of these representations was focused inward, on giving the black community the tools to empower itself, rather than on persuading white society to improve the plight of the black community. This emphasis on community building through the arts was connected to the politics of cultural nationalism, whereby blacks understood themselves to belong to a nation that was defined not by the geographic boundaries of the United States, but by a shared culture.

In 1964, Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka; 1934–) premiered his play *Dutchman*, which became emblematic of the Black Arts Movement. Telling the story of an assimilated, middle-class young black man, Clay, and his fatal encounter with a white woman, *Dutchman* warned its audiences not to be seduced by the temptations of white society. Baraka's strategy—of personifying black America through a man and white America through a woman—emphasizes the gender politics of this period: after a long history of the concerted efforts of mainstream society to problematize black masculinity (from the inflammatory suggestion that all black men were potential rapists of white women to various practices that undermined black men's roles within their families), the Black Power Movement, and thus the Black Arts Movement's plays, offered audiences a new way of looking at black men, emphasizing their strength and decisiveness as the antidote to the Uncle Tom images of yesteryear.

The connection between the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement encouraged artists to think programmatically about how theater could help the black community, and this led to the establishment of local theaters. Amiri Baraka founded two theaters: the Black Arts Repertory Theater School (BARTS) in Harlem and Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey. On the West Coast, playwrights Ed Bullins (1935–) and Marvin X (1944–) founded Black Arts/West in San Francisco in 1966. Likewise, the Free Southern Theater, true to its name, was founded in 1964 to offer free performances in black communities throughout the South. The Free

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Southern Theater was connected to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and it used theater to organize Southern blacks politically, educating them about voting rights and issues that were pertinent to their local elections.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis during this period on building theaters dedicated to black drama also spread beyond the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement. The New Lafayette Theater (1967), the Negro Ensemble Company (1968), and the New Federal Theater (1970) in New York City provided opportunities for new black playwrights, directors, designers, and actors. Many of the artists working during this time created plays that relied heavily on ritual, because doing so allowed authors to connect to African-based representational practices and because these rituals were intended to have a transformative effect on their audiences, connecting black people to their heritage and to one another in entirely new ways.

In addition to the political theater that was informed by the Black Power Movement, black artists worked in other veins: in 1962 Ellen Stewart (1920?–) founded the La MaMa ETC (Experimental Theater Club), which became an important institution in the international experimental theater scene. Still in existence today, the company produces works from a variety of cultures and artistic traditions and often turns to classical theater because it provides an opportunity for black actors to perform roles that are not beholden to American racial stereotypes. In 1964, the very same year that LeRoi Jones premiered *Dutchman*, Adrienne Kennedy (1931–) wrote *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, which used surrealistic techniques to tell the story of Sarah, a young black woman driven crazy by internalized racism. Both Jones and Kennedy received Obie Awards for their plays that year, and Kennedy has continued to write plays that grapple with questions of race, gender, and identity outside the traditions of realism. In 1969 Charles Gordone (1925–1995) premiered his play *No Place to Be Somebody* Off-Broadway and subsequently became the first black playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1970.

One of the most important theatrical events of the 1970s was the premiere of Ntozake Shange's (1948–) *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Rather than a traditional play with a linear narrative, *for colored girls* offers a clear fusion of feminist and black theater practices of the period: using song, dance, and speech, the work tells the stories of women who variously celebrate joyful memories from their past and express frustration at the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism in their lives. Shange's use of a nontraditional performance structure linked her to other black theater artists who realized that mainstream European American forms did not always allow black artists to tell stories in the way they wished to, Shange's emphasis on a collective of women sharing suppressed knowledge reflected one of the primary strategies of female



Leona Johnson, Roxanne Reese, Sharita Hunt, Robbie McCauley, Laurie Carlos (standing), and Rise Collins (kneeling) in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, 1976–1978.



Photofest

empowerment that was espoused by the women's movement of the period. Dubbed a "choreopoem" rather than a play, *for colored girls* appeared on Broadway in 1976 and received both acclaim and controversy. Black women appreciated seeing a story that affirmed the specificity of their lives and told stories that the theater often completely ignored. However, some audiences objected because the play seemed to reinforce stereotypes, by depicting black men in a negative light, and to prioritize concerns of gender over concerns of race. Shange rejected these criticisms, saying that her play was an expression of the complicated ways that love manifests itself within the black community, but the controversy demonstrates that, even when black artists attempt to work outside the traditions of mainstream theater culture, their work is evaluated in relation to those traditions. These different interpretations also serve as a reminder that no single political agenda governs all black artists and that no single work of art can represent all black people's concerns equally.

Although it does not constitute a specific artistic movement equal to the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement, the practice of nontraditional casting became a significant concern in the 1980s. As this survey of black theater suggests, the most frequent and most important opportunities

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for black actors have come from plays that were written by and specifically about black people. However, the effort to depict black life onstage has been a double-edged sword, sometimes yielding deeply moving work and at other times leading to negative stereotypes or self-censorship in the effort to offer only positive depictions of black life. Black actors, therefore, face curtailed opportunities to practice their craft: few black playwrights find opportunities to produce their work in mainstream venues, so the type of roles—if not the quantity—that are available to black actors are few. Nontraditional casting is the practice of using nonwhite actors in roles originally assumed to be white roles but which do not rely on race to tell their stories.<sup>23</sup> As in the example of La MaMa ETC, classical Greek plays are often cast nontraditionally, as are Shakespearean plays, although this practice has invited controversy in the past.

Joseph Papp (1921–1991), a white theater director and producer who founded the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1954, was adamant about casting his shows nontraditionally, specifically hiring black and Puerto Rican actors to play leading roles. Many critics were very harsh in condemning Papp's productions, saying that his actors did not look right in the shows and could not speak Shakespeare's language properly, but Papp remained committed to nontraditional casting.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, Actor's Equity Association, the primary union for professional stage actors, also decided to make nontraditional casting a priority and required the theaters with which it negotiated contracts to determine which roles in their shows could be cast nontraditionally and to hold auditions accordingly. In 1986 the Nontraditional Casting Project was founded specifically to advocate for more-inclusive theater practices, from casting expansively to hiring more diverse production and administrative staff throughout the theater. (Their interest in diversity includes not only race, but also gender and physical ability.) These efforts have helped make nontraditional casting a widely accepted practice, although it still receives criticism from prominent black theater artists.

In 1996 August Wilson (1945–2005), one of the most celebrated playwrights in American history, delivered a keynote speech to a biennial conference, held by the Theater Communications Group, in which he strenuously criticized the continued exclusivity of American theater and its refusal to reflect multiracial society.<sup>25</sup> Wilson drew particular attention to the small number of professional theaters that are dedicated to promoting black culture by producing the work of black playwrights. He also argued that nontraditional casting was bad for black theater because it required black actors to deny the specificity of their culture and history in order to participate in “white” plays that got credit for being universal without having to examine their own racial politics. The practice was also bad for black theater because, by giving black actors the opportunity to perform in works by white playwrights, it took attention away from the fact that black

playwrights were unable to get their plays staged. In other words, the only thing that made nontraditional casting necessary—providing work to black actors—was the fact that mainstream theaters consistently refused to produce black shows. Meanwhile, the black theaters that could provide these opportunities for black actors and playwrights were underfunded and struggling to stay alive.

Wilson's remarks were extremely controversial, but they provided the opportunity for an important reassessment of the goals of black theater. Other artists whose work challenges the boundaries and objectives of black theater and its placement relative to American theater as a whole include George C. Wolfe (1954–), whose 1986 play *The Colored Museum* asked its audience to ponder black writers' relationships to stereotypes generated within and outside the black community; Suzan-Lori Parks (1964–), whose essays, such as "An Equation for Black People Onstage" and plays, such as *Venus* (1996), ponder the role of spectatorship in creating black realities in the theater and in everyday life; Robert Alexander, author of *I Ain't Yo Uncle: A New Jack Revisionist "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (1990); and Pomo Afro Homos, whose performance piece *Fierce Love* (1991) works to counter the invisibility of queer people of color. Additionally, the task of expanding black theater by looking to new forms and new outlets for producing work continues through two important developments: the urban theater circuit and hip-hop theater.

The urban theater circuit probably reaches the largest number of black audiences today. Operating outside the infrastructure of traditional regional theater, urban theater artists write, produce, and direct their own work, touring the country and presenting it in alternate venues. Tyler Perry's *Madea* plays are among the most famous on the urban theater circuit, but older classics include *Mama, I Want to Sing* (1980), *Beauty Shop* (1987), and *What Ever Happened to Black Love?* (1990). Most urban theater productions are promoted directly to the black community through advertisements at churches, on black radio stations, and through old-fashioned word of mouth. This targeted marketing approach is extremely effective and profitable, and it enables the playwrights to create works that appeal specifically to the audience they want to attract, without having to make adjustments that would enable other audiences to be interested in their work. Some critics have suggested that this freedom from the pressures of visibility in the mainstream theater community has actually led to the perpetuation of stereotypical representations of black life, but supporters of the urban theater circuit say instead that these plays reflect the actual life stories and values of working-class blacks, who make up the audiences for the shows. The urban theater circuit is still growing in popularity and profitability and is an important gathering place for the black community, one that exists on its own sociocultural terms.<sup>26</sup>

Hip-hop theater helps mark black theater's turn into the twenty-first century. True to its name, hip-hop theater is an innovation in both form

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and content: like spoken word poetry, it emphasizes rhyme, the musicality of language, and a style of performance that does not imitate traditional realistic theater. Additionally, it incorporates music, dance, and poetry into theatrical productions. Hip-hop theater also translates to the theater the musical act of sampling—by borrowing from earlier dramatic works, transforming them into something new, and creating stories that are collages of multiple voices and perspectives. For example, Will Power's 2005 Off-Broadway production of *The Seven* adapted Aeschylus's Greek tragedy *Seven against Thebes* to relocate the story within a contemporary setting. Kamilah Forbes and Hip-Hop Theater Junction created *Rhyme Deferred* (1999), which sampled from the Bible and whose title evokes Langston Hughes's poetry and, implicitly, connects to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Sarah Jones's *Surface Transit* (2000) depicts the intricate ways in which people are related to one another across the lines of class, race, gender, and nationality, and Aya de Leon's *Thieves in the Temple: The Reclaiming of Hip-Hop* (2004) agitates for a feminist space within the commodified landscape of hip-hop. Much like hip-hop culture at large, hip-hop theater has expanded from its origins in a specifically black cultural context to become a multiracial phenomenon, as demonstrated by the success of white actor and director Danny Hoch, whose *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop* (1997) is recognized as one of the classic works that helped give hip-hop theater visibility as a distinct genre that is worthy of critical attention.

In conclusion, black theater and drama remain vital cultural forces in contemporary American society. Not only do the plays and theatrical institutions complement and challenge representations produced elsewhere, but the act of live performance also makes a powerful contribution to understanding race. Rather than being a matter of biology, black performance emphasizes that much of what people think that they know about race is tied to the behaviors that they recognize and come to expect from themselves and from one another. From William Wells Brown's displays of intelligence and grace, to the women in *for colored girls* embodying the beauty of black womanhood that was denied both on Broadway and in society at large, to the hip-hop theater artists bringing new people into the community of theatergoers—black performers taking the stage play a crucial role in helping audiences understand what blackness is. Their work challenges old ways of seeing blackness and makes new ways of being black possible.

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## Blacks in Early Cinema<sup>1</sup>

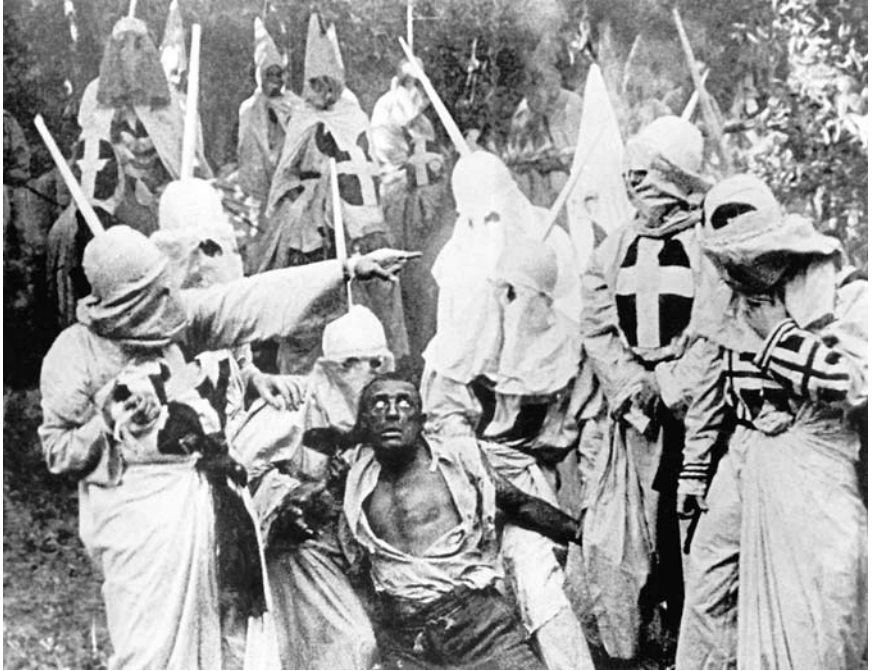
*Daniel Bernardi*

Thoughts of African Americans in early cinema often bring to mind D. W. Griffith's landmark film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Set during the American Civil War and Reconstruction, the controversial film tells the story of two upper-class white families, the Stonemans of the North and the Camerons of the South. The families struggle for unity in the dense fog of war and its aftermath. In telling the stories of the Stonemans and Camerons, the film offers a romantic vision of the "Southern Legend" in its depiction of the Reconstruction era, and in doing so perpetuates some of the most repulsive stereotypes of African Americans known to history. Griffith uses the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the terrorist group responsible for lynching and various other brutalities, as the vehicle by which North and South are reborn as a white nation. Using filmmaking techniques such as editing and cinematography to tell a story of white supremacy, Griffith casts the KKK as heroes: romantic men in white hoods who ride with honor and virtue in defense of white families—and, as a metaphor, a white nation. Thanks to the KKK, the Stonemans and Camerons eventually come together in a marriage symbolizing a white nation reunited to ensure segregation.

*The Birth of a Nation* is based on two novels by Reverend Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Clansman: an Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and *The Leopard's Spots* (1903). A popular contemporary of Griffith, Dixon was known as an outspoken and avowed racist. In borrowing from Dixon's novels and other writings, Griffith guaranteed that his audiences would experience a polarized caricature of former slaves as either "faithful souls" loyal to the legacy of whiteness or overly sexualized "brutes" out for revenge. Indeed, the story of the Stonemans and Camerons is beset by vengeful black brutes, self-righteous but misguided white politicians, plundering carpet-baggers, manipulative mulatto mistresses, plotting mulatto politicians, and the graphic death of a daughter of the Confederacy. Yet, with few exceptions, African American characters are played by European American actors

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Walter Long (as Gus) surrounded by Ku Klux Klan members in D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*.



Photofest

in blackface makeup, making the film more about the ways that whiteness imagines blackness than about blackness itself. Like much of the history of race in cinema, representations of people of color tell us more about whiteness as racism than it does about the people depicted in the film.

Yet *The Birth of a Nation* remains controversial. Some film scholars prefer to sidestep the more racist aspects of the classic work, focusing instead on its role in the transformation of film into storytelling art. These scholars argue that Griffith was an important innovator in the emergence of what came to be known as the Hollywood style. For example, Tom Gunning, in *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years*, argues that Griffith was a pioneer in the transformation of early film from a system of attractions—displaying film as a curiosity—to a system of narration: the use of film for storytelling.<sup>2</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* is the culmination of this great enterprise, marking a shift from film as actuality to cinema as narrative art form and business.

Scholars have also focused on the racist elements of *The Birth of a Nation*, revealing the contribution of the film and its director to the tenacity of the



American color line. Sergei Eisenstein, the famous Russian filmmaker and a contemporary of Griffith, was one of the first to discuss the film's racism when he wrote that "among the most repellent elements in his films (and there are such) we see Griffith as an open apologist for racism, erecting a celluloid monument to the Ku Klux Klan, and joining their attack on Negroes in *The Birth of a Nation*."<sup>3</sup> More recently, Thomas Cripps, Robert Lang, Julia Lesage, and Michael Rogin, among others, have followed Eisenstein's lead in centering their investigations on the racism that dominates the filmmaker's work.<sup>4</sup>

Students of both African American history and film history can take three important points from these arguments about *The Birth of a Nation* and its director: first, that the film stands as a true landmark in the shift from cinema as a novelty and an emerging storytelling medium to cinema as narrative-based mass media; second, that *The Birth of a Nation*, in its representation of the KKK as heroes, of blacks as either loyal slaves or rapist renegades, and of mulattos as lecherous villains, is one of the most racist—indeed, white-supremacist—films in history, the source of many of the stereotypes we see lingering even today; and third, most importantly, that the film's aesthetic and storytelling innovations were in fact motivated by racist intentions and actions both behind the camera and in the narrative, making even the beauty of its art simultaneously ugly in its ideology. The history of film as art cannot—and should not—be separated from the history of film as ideology in general, and racism in particular.

The importance of *The Birth of a Nation* thus lies neither simply in its contribution to the art of cinematic storytelling nor in its overt racism, but rather in the relationship between these forces in the context of film history. Segregating Griffith's contribution to the craft of narrative filmmaking from his racist imagery undermines the profound impact that *The Birth of a Nation* had, and continues to have, on cinematic storytelling. In many ways, Griffith developed this style of filmmaking to tell unambiguous stories of an American color line. In *The Birth of a Nation*, this color line marks a clear hierarchy of races reinforced by romantic representation of the Old South, social segregation, antimiscegenation laws, disenfranchisement, and the natural—divine—right of white rule into the future. And yet these representations, found in a 1915 film, have their own history.

## RACISM AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

The racism we see in *The Birth of a Nation* was facilitated in part by a commitment to white superiority that can be traced to the very beginning of cinema. The turn of the century, a period when Griffith was entering adulthood and struggling with a fledgling theater career, was marked by a Supreme Court that, finding itself unable to "eradicate racial instincts,"

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institutionalized and legitimized Jim Crow exclusionism in such infamous court decisions as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898). The imperialistic and propagandistic practices of the United States in Hawaii, the Philippine Islands, Guam, and the Caribbean islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico both before and during the Spanish–American War, ensured that the label “nonwhite” included Africans and African Americans, Asians and Asian Americans, Latinas and Latinos, native peoples, and immigrants such as European Jews, Italians, and Gypsies. Most of these sorts of practices were legitimized by the intellectual and academic community as a brand of social Darwinism that supported the notion that Caucasians, and especially Anglo Saxons, were superior to all other “races.” This ideology became a pervasive worldview.

The rise of Democrats to Congressional power in 1910, and the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson as President in 1912 brought a return of Southern patriarchal and racist beliefs and practices to political prominence. This shift in political power, coupled with growing anxiety over an influx of Southern European and Jewish immigrants and the migration of African Americans to Northern cities, was used by various politicians and community leaders to support both de jure and de facto separate and unequal practices. This period saw numerous urban protests, as well as the founding of the NAACP and the Urban League, two organizations created to combat the growing menace of what C. Vann Woodward labeled the “capitulation to racism.”<sup>5</sup>

The social and political factors that informed early filmmaking corresponded with the transformations that took place in the film industry. Film scholars typically divide this period into two phases. The first is labeled by Gunning as the “Cinema of Attractions” and by others as “pre-cinema” and ran from 1896 to about 1908, a time during which film was at first primarily an attraction of actualities or snippets of daily life. Toward the end of this period, around 1902, filmmakers began experimenting with the use of film to tell stories. The second phase of early cinema, which Gunning labels the “Cinema of Narrative Integration,” runs roughly from 1908 to 1915. Characterized by growing artistic, industrial, and popular interest in narrative filmmaking or films telling stories driven by characters and moral plots, it was also characterized by an industry that worked on a large scale to facilitate the growth of a mass medium. Both these phases of early cinema were marked by a profound and overt commitment to racism.

### CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

In the earliest years of filmmaking, films that told stories had not yet been developed. Instead, people flocked to arcade-like shops to watch films such as Thomas Edison’s *The Kiss* (1896), enthralled simply by the sight of

two people embracing in full motion. Yet even in this period racism itself was an attraction. Along with kissing lovers, racial caricatures were one of the more popular attractions in a disturbing “primitive” cinema. For instance, a caricatured Chinese character is chased about in *The Chinese Laundry Scene* (1895), a so-called actuality that reportedly enjoyed high exposure for the period. Around the same time, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, another popular attraction, brought the Indian—trained like a loyal horse by a white man—to early film shorts in such Edison works as *Buffalo Bill*, *Sioux Ghost Dance*, *Buffalo Dance*, and *Indian War Council*.

African Americans were subjected to a consistent and widespread form of racism during this period. For example, in 1902 and 1903 William Selig, who had worked in early minstrel shows, produced a number of racist shorts, including *Interrupted Crap Game*, a film of “darkies” who neglect their game to pursue a chicken; *Prize Fight in Coontown*, depicting “two bad coons”; and *A Night in Blackville*, a short showing “two coons” dancing with their “best babies.” Lubin films also contributed to racist depictions of African Americans, particularly with their popular “watermelon pictures.” As the Lubin catalogue explains, “The demand for a new watermelon picture had induced us to pose two colored women in which they are portrayed, ravenously getting on the outside of a number of melons, much to the amusement of the onlookers.” Crescent Films, a partnership between William Paley and William F. Steiner, made several racist shorts. One such film, *Avenging a Crime* (1904), depicts a blackface caricature, who has killed a white woman, being chased and subsequently lynched by a squad of whites. In many films of this sort, caricatures coded as black males are seen as childlike or animal-like, requiring either supervision or bondage. In comparison, characters coded as white males are depicted as natural leaders and rightful disciplinarians.

Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company produced a number of films before 1908 that helped integrate racism into the narrating system. This is especially the case with blackface, which dominated almost all representations of African Americans in Porter’s films; indeed, even African Americans who played “darkies” in these films often had to wear blackface. Some blacks weren’t back enough in the white imagination. Porter’s cinematic style included the stereotype of a shiftless, lazy, watermelon-eating, dancing “darkie,” a caricature that later found its way into Griffith’s films.

Janet Staiger’s research regarding *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) shows that the articulation of race in the film had a clear intertextual history that included not only Harriet Beecher Stowe’s best-selling novel (1852) but also George L. Aiken’s popular stage version (which Staiger notes ran for over ninety years in the United States).<sup>6</sup> Thus audience knowledge of the film’s “moral and abolitionist” plot, or its liberal coding of African Americans as loyal-yet-inferior, was a likely factor in its popularity. Hence, racism is intimately connected to the history of film viewing and reception.

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Musser's research regarding *The Watermelon Patch* (1905) shows how Porter's use of filmic technique, particularly sight gags and mise-en-scène, worked to cement the function of the black caricature as, above all, a threat to white civilization. The "race" of the caricatures is implicitly offered by the film as a causal explanation for their crime. The film tells the story of twenty blackface thieves stealing watermelons, and subsequently being chased for their crime by a small group of whites. The caricatures eventually find refuge in a small shack, where they dance and partake of their spoils. The white vigilantes inevitably find them and plug up the chimney of the house, causing soot to fall on the caricatures' faces—a blatant racial sight gag, as Musser points out. Moreover, the shots of the numerous blackface caricatures in the shack, juxtaposed with the whites outside the shack show the blackfaces as "pygmies" (dwarfed by their ability to all fit into a tiny shack) and the whites as giants. Mise-en-scène becomes one of the means by which whiteness is enunciated in this Porter film.<sup>7</sup>

Porter's *Life of a Cowboy* (1906), in which a brownface greaser, redface savages, and loyal Indians all function to support the myth of the heroic whiteface cowboy, demonstrates that racism reached beyond African Americans. The film shows a greaser lusting after a white woman and a band of renegade Indians threatening the white community, here metaphorically depicted as a stagecoach. The greaser and his band of renegade Indians capture a white girl, who is eventually saved by the white cowboy—a common narrative resolution. As the story comes to an end, the greaser sneaks up on the reunited white couple, gun poised to exact his revenge, only to be shot by a loyal Indian girl. The spectators of this film were entertained not only by the traditional caricaturing of Mexican Americans but also by the established dichotomy between the noble savages, loyal to the white man, and the renegade Indians, a horde of bestial creatures threatening white civilization and white women.

These examples show that no single individual or film company was responsible, or even largely responsible, for integrating racism into early American cinema. In fact, many American Biograph Company films before Griffith show instances of racism. Films such as *Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904) portrayed stereotypes of African Americans as shiftless, criminal, and lazy. Another film, *The Chicken Thief* (1904), depicted chicken-stealing "darkies" chased by whites and was essentially a forerunner to Porter's *The Watermelon Patch*. Racism in cinema had numerous sociopolitical, industrial, and individual proponents.

### CINEMA OF NARRATIVE INTEGRATION

The second period of early cinema can be referred to as the Cinema of Narrative Integration, marked by Griffith's tenure at Biograph and culminating in his epic film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Griffith made over 450

“short” films for American Biograph Company (later known only as Biograph) depicting the inability of nonwhites to fully assimilate into white culture and society. Ultimately these films provide a justification for their servitude, segregation, and punishment. Through stories of servitude, colonial love, and the white families (and white women), the filmmaker casts people of color, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, as threats to the normality and superiority of whiteness.

The year 1908 was pivotal in this period: the year when Griffith actually began working for the company. As Tom Gunning notes, “1908 is a year not so much of innovation as of crystallization. It is not the year of the first story film, or of the first full reel [1,000-foot] or the first film exchanges or nickelodeons. Rather, it is the year when the film industry tried to knit all these developments into a stable industry.”<sup>8</sup> In the year of Griffith’s directorial debut with *The Adventures of Dollie* (1908), both the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) and the National Board of Review, the industry’s censorship apparatus, were established by the major patent holders and film manufacturers in order to stabilize and control the film market.

Both the MPPC and the National Board of Review, supported by industry trades and the critical press, attempted to “upgrade” the actual decor and safety of movie houses as well as “uplift” audiences to a respectable level. The logic was that upgrading and uplifting would minimize censorship and ensure market stability. Mass attendance was essential to increasing profits. Yet even as the industry cracked down on explicit sexuality, violence, and other such “vulgar” content, issues of white racism persisted. It was not considered inappropriate—certainly not worthy of censure—to depict African Americans and other people of color as bloodthirsty or noble-yet-inferior savages, or to consistently cast them as devious, wanton threats to white society, white families, and white women. For the most part, blackface, brownface, redface, and yellowface were not deemed unacceptable or immoral. Instead, censorship excluded African Americans and other “nonwhites” from acting roles and restricted their admittance into theaters, at times relegating them to the balconies.

Although racist representations and narratives did not require “upgrading,” depictions of African Americans and other nonwhites as somehow equal or superior to whites did. The social Darwinian paradigm of the period precluded any evidence in controversy of Anglo Saxon and “Caucasian” superiority. This can be seen in the case of Jack Johnson, an African American boxer who defeated European American boxers far too frequently for community and industry leaders. Johnson’s boxing victories produced a tension in the racial “order,” and various communities and the film industry responded by censoring films of his fights.

The industrial move toward upgrading cinema and uplifting audiences put pressure on filmmakers of the period to emphasize narrative legibility.

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Gunning notes that “filmmakers like Griffith had to respond to the challenge of balancing new cultural pretension with the need to make films which were narratively comprehensible to the broadly based nickelodeon audience.”<sup>9</sup> During this period, Griffith’s films incorporated a systematic emphasis on suspense, character psychology, and moral judgment. Gunning provides a concise summation: “The desire to imitate respectable forms of art and to counter allegations of obscenity provided a spur for the creation of a filmic rhetoric that could convey the mental life of characters and preach a sermon of morality.”<sup>10</sup>

As early cinema became more concerned with narrative continuity, films like *A Mexican’s Gratitude* (1909), released by Essanay, and *The Poisoned Flume* (1911), released by the American Film Manufacturing Company, brought caricatures of the villainous greaser and loyal brownface to the silver screen. In the first film, a good Mexican is one depicted as loyal to the white man. In the second film, a vindictive brownface who lusts after a white woman is killed for his interracial desires.

Yet Griffith reserved special vehemence for African Americans. This can be seen throughout his work at Biograph. *The Zulu’s Heart* (1908), for example, is one of several Griffith films telling the story of a white family attacked by, as the Biograph Bulletin reads, “merciless black brutes.” Set in South Africa, a nation Griffith seemed to think was not unlike the Old South, the narrative shows a Zulu tribe attacking a Boer family, made up of a father, mother, and daughter. As in Griffith’s Westerns, the natives and not the whites are the invaders in this African country. Early in the film, a brief cross-cut sequence consisting of shots of the white family happily traversing a rural trail in a wagon and of the Zulu coming down from the hillside in pursuit, heightens the suspense and mood of the story. Eventually, the Zulu attackers catch up to the white wagon, killing the father in a dramatic and violent battle. In a performance similar to that of the Indians in Griffith’s Indian films, the Zulu tribesmen enter in a swarm-like fashion, continually waving their arms about and swinging their heads from side to side. “Up rush the prancing, jibbing, gibbering barbarians,” the Biograph Bulletin reads.

The rest of the narrative involves an elaborate chase sequence that draws the viewer into the didacticism of Griffith’s vision. After the father has been killed, the next shot shows the mother, having sought refuge in the hills, hiding her daughter among the rocks. In the same shot, the Zulu attackers find the mother and take her away, leaving one Zulu behind. The remaining Zulu eventually stumbles upon the little girl. Just as the Zulu is poised to cut the girl’s throat, she pulls out her doll. The Zulu, enthralled with the doll, immediately has a change of heart and, instead of killing the girl, hugs and kisses her. Thus a horde of menacing and deviant nonwhites is balanced by a loyal and serving—or noble—nonwhite. The juxtaposition of what amounts to “good” savage and “bad” savage enforces the ideology that

there are nonwhites who serve—who are “good”—and nonwhites who attack: those who are “bad.”

The chase continues, shedding further light on the dual nature of the Zulu in Griffith’s imagination. After the “good” Zulu hides the little girl among the rocks, he starts chasing the “bad” Zulu. Griffith then cuts to a shot of the mother at the Zulu camp. Surrounded by the Zulu, she falls to her knees in fright and desperation. Using the psychology of characters to enforce the voice of whiteness, the Zulu captors stick their chests out and continue to wave their arms frantically in the air. Their plans are foiled, however, as the “good” Zulu recaptures the white mother, taking her to her daughter.

Always aware of the suspense of a chase, Griffith cuts to a shot of three Zulu attackers finding the little girl. To further emphasize the barbaric nature of the Zulu brutes, the voice of whiteness depicts the caricatures as physically abusing the little girl in a manner difficult to stomach even for present-day viewers. Zulu attackers are shown kicking and dragging the little girl; one of them cuts at her with his knife. The performance is chilling and brutal; the psychology of the characters is clear: they are beasts.

Soon the good Zulu enters and defeats the bad Zulu. In the last shot of the film, the good Zulu, the mother, and the daughter stand against a pictorial landscape. The noble savage points in the direction the mother and daughter must travel to get home. Segregation is pivotal to narrative resolution: the Zulu and white woman must not, and cannot, remain in the same space. Before leaving the scene, the daughter gives the Zulu her doll. The Zulu holds and kisses the doll, much as he did earlier, and then looks to the sky in prayer. Segregation now established and the attacking nonwhites having been punished, the end shot effectively summarizes the voice of whiteness: the white family and white woman are divine, worthy of sacrifice and servitude. God is on the side of the whites.

Unlike *The Zulu’s Heart*, *The Girls and Daddy* (1909) constructs a blackface caricature as an outright sexual predator, a wanton threat to two angelic white girls. The film tells the story of two burglars, one white and the other a “lowdown Negro,” who, unaware of each other, burglarize a white man’s house. Inside the house are two young women serenely sleeping, their angelic vulnerability foregrounded. Unlike the white burglar, the blackface caricature decides to lustfully chase the women. In the end, the white burglar, faithful to his race, saves the white girls by capturing the blackface burglar and turning him over to the police. Narrative resolution is achieved when the threatening nonwhite is captured and punished, the virtue of the white girl is preserved (by a white male), and the white family safe and secure, and the white burglar forever loyal to his race.

Particularly compelling in this film is its cinematic style, which highlights the psychology of the characters and, ultimately, the racial morality of

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whiteness. For instance, after the girls become aware of the presence of the blackface burglar in their home, they quickly move to impede his deviant advances. We see shots of the girls clutching each other in fear, followed by shots of the blackface caricature in pursuit. Meanwhile, the blackface caricature's physical movements and facial expression connote a savage psychology, foreshadowing Gus's performance in *The Birth of a Nation*. We also see a long shot of the colored caricature frantically jumping over and through chairs that have been placed in front of a locked door. The camera pans, revealing behind the door the two girls, one of whom sacrifices herself by staying so that the other can escape. The movement of the camera in this way functions quite similarly to a parallel edit, rhetorically linking the pursuit of the blackface burglar with the fright and virtue of the white girls.

Even more telling is Griffith's first two-part story, *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled* (1910). The films tell the story of a slave, George, who sacrifices his meager savings and ties to black culture in order to faithfully serve the values of Southern whiteness. In the beginning of the two-part film, the patriarch of the Southern white family goes off to fight the North and is quickly killed, initiating George's life-long devotion to the widowed wife and daughter. The Southern patriarch's presence is nonetheless maintained throughout the film in the figure of his military sword, which is returned to the family after his death. George places the sword on the living room mantle, enabling the icon to mediate his narrative and spatial proximity to the white mother and daughter.

Soon, drunken Northern soldiers ransack and burn the family plantation. George risks losing his life to save not only the little girl left inside, but the sword as well. Eventually, George gives the white mother and her child his shack, sleeping outside to ensure their safety from the now-free slaves and making it clear to viewers that, as with the Chinese caricature in *That Chink at Golden Gulch*, his intentions are not miscegenistic. He hangs the sword prominently on one of the shack's walls, allowing the voice of the white patriarch to remain a screen dominant.

Mise-en-scène in this two-part film is markedly segregated as George is systematically restricted from the immediate space of white females. One notable exception occurs at the beginning of the film, when he play-acts as a horse for the white girl to ride. In most scenes, George is spatially segregated. In shots where the slave and the white mother are featured in the same frame, they are generally positioned in different planes. George is almost always in the background, even when narrative logic suggests that he belongs in the foreground. In the few scenes in which they are shown on the same plane, a white male or the sword usually mediates their proximity. Thus, the voice of the narrative utilizes spatial segregation in order to restrict blackface caricatures from the literal space of white women, the



racist ideals of whiteness allowing no sexual associations between nonwhite servants and white masters.

In a melodramatic twist of Southern romanticism, the widow eventually dies of depression, life with George and without her husband having apparently overwhelmed her. George faithfully continues care for the little girl, eventually sacrificing his meager savings to secretly send her to private school—an ironic and particularly disturbing plot twist in light of the restriction of African Americans from education as a tool used to maintain slavery and segregation. When George runs out of money, he steals from a white man in hopes of paying her remaining school costs. Though caught trying to return the money—George is forever faithful to the laws of white society—he explains his dilemma and is forgiven. The young woman is eventually saved by a white cousin who agrees to marry her. As a reward for his self-sacrificing service, George receives a single handshake from the cousin. The film ends with a shot of George in his shack, clutching his master's sword—his trust fulfilled.

Clearly, the sword is a prominent symbol of George's devotion and loyalty to the values and ideals of both the South and the white patriarch. It is a phallic icon with a particularly white and patriarchal charge. In the possession of George, however, the sword is not a phallus. It does not confer power on the domesticated slave. In fact, once put in charge of the sword, George loses everything—his shack, his money, and all ties to black culture—making him more a slave after the North's victory than before. Instead, the long and shiny sword empowers the myth of an “honorable” and romantic South where good slaves sacrificed their freedom and all sexual desire on the honorable, virtuous altar of Southern whiteness. The icon becomes a sharp symbol of George's perpetual servitude.

## THE BIRTH OF A NATION

This history culminates in *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that literally sets the stage for the future of cinema. The remainder of this essay will discuss three essential elements of the film: (1) Griffith's innovative use of parallel editing, (2) protests—particularly those organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and (3) Griffith's response to charges that his film was racist. Although the film and responses to it are far more complex than can be illustrated in this essay, these elements point both to its impact as a work of ideological art and to its role in the shaping of cinema as show business.

As noted, *The Birth of a Nation* has a history. And this history can be traced to, in the first instance, the director's early work, including *The Girls and Daddy*, discussed earlier. Indeed, the chase scene in *The Girls and Daddy* foreshadows the famous sequence in *The Birth of a Nation* in which Gus,

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another lustful blackface brute, chases Flora, a darling daughter of the confederacy, to her death. Like *The Girls and Daddy*, Griffith cuts back and forth between Gus pursuing Flora, obviously intending to rape her, and Flora either strolling ignorant of Gus or, after realizing what Gus desires, running from the “renegade Negro” in abject fear. “You see, I’m a Captain now—and I want to marry . . .” reads an intertitle linked to Gus. Following an earlier scene of the legislature voting down antimiscegenation laws, the scene takes place in a forest. Long shadows cast by looming trees divide natural lighting in ways that add a visual rhyme to the narrative context of the scene, and the pacing of the edits adds a degree of tension to the sequence as Griffith initially lingers on shots of Flora. A close-up of Gus shows a menacing and prurient expression on his face. “Wait, missie, I won’t hurt yeh,” a provocative intertitle reads. In the meantime, Griffith cuts to a third location, where Ben Cameron searches in despair for the young Flora. In one of the most notorious scenes in film history, Flora elects to jump off a cliff to her death rather than be defiled by Gus. Ben is too late to save his confederate sister, but not too late to organize a Klan to track Gus down and bring him to justice. As punishment, he is castrated and lynched (the castration scene was later cut by Griffith in response to threats of censorship by local film review boards). Although he doesn’t save Flora from tragic death, Ben is a hero nonetheless for his creation and stewardship of the Klan. Hence, the birth of the Klan is linked to the threat posed by black brutes to white women.

Another innovative but racist parallel editing scene is found at the end of *The Birth of a Nation* as the Klan rides to save helpless whites from threatening blacks. The end of the film actually includes two chase scenes, one following the other and both including the Klan as heroic. In one, we find a Northern father, holed up with the elder Cameron in a cabin, holding his rifle butt over his child’s head, poised to kill her lest she be attacked by the black brutes outside. The situation apparently calls for the same fate suffered by Flora. Griffith moves the camera into a close-up of the little girl’s face, simultaneously revealing fear and innocence. In the other scene, we see Lynch and his henchman on the verge of forcing Elsie to marry the mulatto politician. She falls into his dark arms as he seemingly smiles in satisfaction. Both scenes are powerful, as Griffith moves the camera along the Klan’s ride to the rescue through a winding forest road. The effect of this technique is that the shots of the Klan offer viewers a sense of impending heroism. In both scenes, the Klan indeed arrives in the nick of time, narrative tension at full pressure, restoring white supremacy. Blacks are subdued and the Klan is honored by a parade and applause. Constructed with artistry through parallel editing, a technique now commonly employed by filmmakers around the world, the scene is perhaps one of the most racist moments in American film history.

Disgusted by the negative images of African Americans and the positive images of the Klan, the NAACP, as well as numerous other social and political organizations, called for protests and boycotts. W. E. B Du Bois, one of America's leading intellectuals at the time, published poignant commentaries in *The Crisis*, the NAACP's journal. These actions delayed exhibitions of the film and prompted local review boards, fearful of race riots, to require minor changes. Even the Communist Party got involved, picketing the film as evidence of the fascist failings of capitalism. As Janet Staiger notes, quoting Nickieann Fleener-Marzec: "Between 1915 and 1973 the right to screen *The Birth of Nation* was challenged at least 120 times."<sup>11</sup>

The famous director responded to the criticism of his film in an editorial letter published in the *New York Globe*. Claiming that his "associates" maintained a "dignified silence in the face of an organized attack" by "publicity seekers and fanatics," Griffith sought to ensure both the box office success of the film and its place in film history:

Most well informed men know now that slavery was an economic mistake. The treatment of the Negroes during the days of Reconstruction is shown effectually and graphically in our picture. We show many phrases of the questions and we do pay particular attention to those faithful Negroes who stay with the former masters and were ready to give up their lives to protect their white friends. No characters in the story are applauded with greater fervor than the good Negroes whose devotion is so clearly shown.<sup>12</sup>

Griffith's response is clearly designed as a marketing ploy to further ensure the success of the film. As we have seen, it reveals also a key feature of the story. In *The Birth of a Nation*, there are "good" blacks (African Americans who remained faithful to whiteness and segregation) and "bad" blacks (African Americans who were bestial, lustful, untrustworthy, ignorant, and unfaithful to whiteness). This, a narrative pattern that Griffith established during his days at American Biograph—as we have seen in *His Trust* and *His Trust Fulfilled*—and throughout his career, remained a preferred marketing strategy.

The controversy over *The Birth of a Nation* did not end with Griffith's deft use of the editorial pages of the *New York Globe* and in fact continued through subsequent exhibitions of the film. Several scholars report race rioting in major cities after screenings of the film. Equally disturbing is the apparent fact that the Klan used the classic film as a recruiting tool. According to Michael Rogin, the Klan "screened the movie in the 1920s to build membership in the millions."<sup>13</sup> Other scholars have reported a rise in the lynching of blacks by white vigilantes in response to the film's depiction of African American men as rapists.

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The impact of *The Birth of a Nation* was felt not only in the political and legal spheres of American life but also in the specific experiences and protests of the African American community. In 1920, for example, African American independent filmmaker and novelist Oscar Micheaux addressed the film with his film *Within Our Gates*. In this classic, Micheaux's ending serves as a challenging homage to the end of *The Birth of a Nation*. We see the attempted rape of a black woman by a white man as her family is being lynched for a crime they did not commit. In this scene, not explicitly tied to a historical event but nonetheless far more historically accurate than any image of blackness found in Griffith's classic, Micheaux exposes the representation of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation* as a lie masking the horrors of white supremacy during the era of slavery and Reconstruction. It must be remembered that, in actuality, white slaveholders raped African American women in horrific numbers in plain sight of the nation.

Despite protests and direct evidence that the Klan was violent in the extreme, Griffith remained stoic and even belligerent—refusing to acknowledge the film's racism or its culpability in advancing the agenda of the Klan. In 1930, upon the release of one of his last films, *Abraham Lincoln*, the Southern director sat down with Walter Huston, the star of the Lincoln film, for an interview. In this filmed interview, located on the Kino International DVD *The Birth of a Nation & the Civil War Films of D.W. Griffith* (1915), Walter presents Griffith with a Confederate officer's sword, an ironic capitulation to the sword found in *His Trust*, *His Trust Fulfilled*, and *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith, visibly touched by the gift, goes on to defend his depiction of the Klan as honorable and justified, even reminiscing romantically about how his mother helped stitch the Klan's white robes as they rode in defense of the Old South.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of *The Birth of a Nation*, a highly complex film, lies not simply in either its contribution to the art of cinematic storytelling or its overt racism, but also in the relationship between these forces in the context of film history. Segregating Griffith's contribution to the craft of narrative filmmaking from his racist imagery undermines the impact *The Birth of a Nation* had—and continues to have—on cinematic storytelling. In many ways, Griffith developed this style of filmmaking to tell unambiguous stories of an American color line. In *The Birth of a Nation*, this color line marks a clear hierarchy of races reinforced by romantic representation of the Old South, social segregation, antimiscegenation laws, disenfranchisement, and the natural—even divine—right of white rule into the future.

In thinking about the history of African Americans in film, it must be remembered that art cannot be separated from ideology. *The Birth of a Nation* illustrates that film can be at once style and politics—simultaneously imaginative, brilliant, reactionary, and racist. If Griffith's landmark film teaches anything, it teaches the ways in which the art of cinema can construct white supremacy as history written with artistry. Griffith's innovations in pursuit of a style of narrative filmmaking were not simply in the service of storytelling: they were in the service of white supremacy. Thus the art of *The Birth of a Nation* is its racism, particularly its construction of whiteness through the lens of stereotypes of blackness and the craft of cinematic technique. In this film, as in film history generally, art is ideological, form is content, and cinema is simultaneously moving, artistic, ugly, and painful, the sad nature of "blacks" in early cinema.

## NOTES

1. Work in this essay has been previously published in the following essays: Daniel Bernardi, "The Voice of Whiteness: D.W. Griffith's Biograph (1908–1913)," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 103–128; Daniel Bernardi, "The Birth of a Nation: Integrating Race into the Narrator System," in *Film Analysis: a Norton Reader*, eds. R. L. Rutsky and Jeffrey Geiger (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 82–97.

2. Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991). See also Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, nos. 3–4 (1986): 63–70.

3. Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today," in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: HBI, 1949), 234.

4. See Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Robert Lang, "Introduction," in *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director*, ed. Robert Lang (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Julia Lesage, "Broken Blossoms: Artful Racism, Artful Rape," *Jump Cut* 26 (December 1981): 51–55; Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision: D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 150–195.

5. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): 67–109.

6. Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 105–123.

7. Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

8. Tom Gunning, "Weaving a Narrative: Style and Economic Background in Griffith's Biograph Films," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 12.

9. Gunning, *Origins of American Narrative Film*, 147–148.

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10. Ibid., 183.

11. Janet Staiger, "The Birth of a Nation: Reconsidering Its History," in *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith*: 199.

12. Robert Lang, "The Birth of a Nation: History, Ideology, Narrative Form," in *ibid.*: 169.

13. Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision: D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," in *ibid.*: 29.

## Early African American Pioneers in Independent Cinema: From Humor as Camouflage to Provocation as Revelation

*Charlene Regester*

Early black filmmaking did not originate at the same historical moment in the late 1880s as the filmmaking industry, but flourished from seeds planted by this movement. Black filmmakers forged their own efforts when they recognized filmmaking's importance as a financial venture, as a means by which to entertain the newly migrated urban populations, and as a means of representing themselves on screen. Numerous attempts were made by a number of black filmmakers, such as Hunter C. Haynes, of the Afro-American Film Company; Peter P. Jones, of the Peter P. Jones Photoplay Company; Richard Maurice, of the Maurice Film Company; Charles West, of the Peacock Photoplay Company; Sidney P. Dones, of the Booker T. Film Company; and Leigh Whipper, of the Leigh Whipper Film Company, among others. However, few black filmmakers survived the business to make their mark on black filmmaking; most were thwarted by financial constraints, the limitation of screening venues, distribution obstacles, and segregation practices that prevailed in the entertainment arena.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite these and other obstacles, a minimal but determined group remained, having appreciated the novelty of this new technological invention and realized that black filmmaking would alter the social fabric of American society. A paucity of black filmmakers did emerge in the filmmaking arena, and their contributions characterize three phases of early black filmmaking. These include a) the first phase, symbolized by the efforts of the Foster Photoplay Company—a company centrally focused on producing comedies; b) the second phase, symbolized by the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, which specialized in producing racially

inspiring narratives that frequently reflected bourgeois interests and values; and c) the third phase, symbolized by the Oscar Micheaux Film Corporation, using realistic representations of black life—controversial because of the company’s exposure and critique of interracial and intraracial conflict.

Although this three-phase paradigm may seem an appropriate categorization of early black filmmaking, it is possible that at a later date, the concurrent works of other black filmmakers may someday become available and alter this paradigm. Thus, while critiquing early black filmmakers—examining them by providing a brief description of the filmmakers and their works, a critical analysis of their films in those instances where films survive, and a description of their contributions to early black filmmaking—it is important to keep in mind the possibility of additions from that era at some later date.

### PHASE I: THE PRODUCTION OF BLACK COMEDIES BY WILLIAM FOSTER AND THE FOSTER PHOTOPLAY COMPANY

As Chicago became a mecca for the burgeoning black migrating population who fled the South in search of opportunities afforded in a Northern urban metropolis, that city also became the place of origin for some of the first black filmmakers, such as William Foster. Jacqueline Stewart notes the importance of Chicago as a place of origin for black filmmaking, asserting that “at the turn of the twentieth century, Black Chicagoans enjoyed a wide range of leisure activities—a world of things to see and do—that were unavailable or highly restricted in other parts of the country, particularly the South. Migrants to Chicago frequently cited increases in leisure time and disposable income . . .”<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the first black filmmakers would choose a city boasting a large black population eager for entertainment and seeking to assert themselves as new immigrants. Responding to the needs of these transcendent blacks, William Foster became one of the earliest black filmmakers of this period.

#### *Foster’s Brief Biography*

William Foster was born on September 16, 1860. As a young adult, he was associated with the entertainment industry in New York, where he worked as a paddock man and clocker with Jack McDonald, a well-known horseman in the 1880s. Foster became interested in the entertainment industry and later worked as publicity promoter for Bob Cole and Rosamond Johnson’s *A Trip to Coontown* Company. Foster worked in a similar capacity with the (Bert) Williams and (George) Walker comedy productions *In Dahomey* and *Abyssinia*.<sup>3</sup>



Following his association with the New York theatrical circuit, Foster headed for Chicago, where he was attracted to the opening of Robert Mott's Pekin Theater—initially a music hall, but converted in 1904 to a theater, with its famous stock company of actors, writers, and musicians.<sup>4</sup> Foster, serving as business manager and trusted adviser to the Pekin Theater, booked black vaudeville acts.<sup>5</sup>

Foster expanded his efforts, and in 1909, he became secretary to the Goats, an organization designed to assist performers who suffered from illness or living in desperate straits. This organization sponsored “ramble[s] every Friday at midnight at one of the theatres.”<sup>6</sup> One year later, in 1910, Foster operated the William Foster Music Company, located on State Street—a hub of black entertainment and theaters.<sup>7</sup>

Within a year, Foster became an entertainment correspondent for the *Indianapolis Freeman* newspaper. He soon became an entertainment reviewer for more black newspapers, using “Juli Jones” as his pseudonym. Foster frequently noted the contributions of black songwriters and performers.<sup>8</sup>

These experiences facilitated his attraction to film production, and in 1913 he shifted from journalism and music toward film production. His first picture, *The Railroad Porter* (1913), launched a film career that extended well into the 1930s, with several other features. Still, Foster frequently interrupted film production with other pursuits. For example, in 1919 he returned to journalism, writing for the *Half-Century Magazine*, in which he articulated his disappointment with blacks for failing to take advantage of the lucrative opportunities offered by the motion-picture industry. He contended, “If our colored people with an interest in the race at heart would pool their money, stop fighting each other, and get down to business, they would not only reap unlimited returns, but would do the race a great service.”<sup>9</sup>

However, by 1920 Foster himself could no longer survive in the film industry. He appeared in an advertisement for Pathe Records—an ad that promoted the William Foster Record and Roll Supply Company, which was located on Indiana Avenue in Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Then, perhaps out of frustration or his inability to make the entertainment industry financially lucrative, Foster moved in and out of jobs: working with a Haitian Coffee Company from 1925–1927; later, joining A. J. Gary to form the *Chicago Daily Times*, a short-lived newspaper; next, associating with the *Chicago Defender*, a job that also ended—this time, according to Lester Walton, because “Foster severed his ties with the *Defender* when a change was made in the business management. Foster is said to have quit because of his friendship for one of the discharged executives.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1929 Foster accepted an appointment as a director for the Hollywood Pathe Corporation—an opportunity presented to him when he established

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a friendship with the black doorman at Pathe, Major Morris. Foster's first feature in this new capacity was titled *Black and Tan*—a film that explores “the underworld, rum runners, dope fiends, and murder.”<sup>12</sup> Foster's productions at Pathe may have allowed him to work with such well-known black actors as Clarence Muse, Stepin Fetchit, and Buck and Bubbles.<sup>13</sup> Foster's second release in this position was *Fool and Fire*—a film that may have been scripted but never actually produced.<sup>14</sup>

While working in Hollywood, Foster never abandoned his desire to produce race pictures. In response to his fear that white filmmakers believed that so-called high-class black films were not marketable,<sup>15</sup> he vowed to start a production company exclusively for that purpose in Santa Monica.<sup>16</sup> Foster reportedly established offices for his company on Central Avenue in Los Angeles, with the following officers: Foster, president; Machlon Cooley, vice president; and Norman O. Houston, secretary and treasurer.<sup>17</sup> Foster's return to black film production may have been too ambitious; however, little is known of these efforts. Foster met his untimely death in April 9, 1940, in Los Angeles, where he was survived by his wife, Ella B. Foster.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Will Foster Photoplay Company Productions*

In retrospect, Foster's associations with the music world and entertainment industry led him to filmmaking. In 1913 he and Joe Shoecraft purchased equipment “to supply the public with high class films in an endeavor to offset the malicious ones produced by other companies.”<sup>19</sup> This joint venture resulted in a filmed production of a YMCA dedication and ball game.<sup>20</sup> Within a few months of these early releases, Foster produced his first feature, *The Railroad Porter* (1913), which was screened at the 700-seat States Theater—a theater that, according to Stewart, was one of the most prominent and well-publicized black theaters in Chicago's Black Belt districts.<sup>21</sup> Although this was Foster's first picture, he failed to receive financial support from “married men of the race. Finally a white gentleman loaned [Foster] enough money to get the machine.”<sup>22</sup> Stewart, in reviewing this negligence to Foster, bemuses that “Whether this item takes a joking dig at Chicago's race men for not financing Foster's endeavor, or for their hypocritical moral standards (which are ostensibly higher than those of whites), or is stating fact, it demonstrates how issues of content and financing were foregrounded from the very beginning of Black film production.”<sup>23</sup>

Actors appearing in *The Railroad Porter* included Lottie Grady, a former member of the Pekin Stock Company (wife); Cassie Burch Slaughter (wife's friend); Kid Brown (railroad porter); Edgar Ellison (waiter); Bell Coles (police officer); and Howard Kelly, a member of the Pekin Stock Company. The film focuses on a young wife who assumes that her husband has temporarily abandoned her and decides to invite a fashionably dressed

chap to dinner. When her husband returns home to witness his wife dining with this young waiter, the husband threatens the gentleman with his revolver—which he uses rather carelessly. To the husband's dismay, the waiter produces a revolver of his own, and despite the laughter-provoking commotion that ensues, no one is injured, and all ends happily.<sup>24</sup>

Foster's *Railroad Porter* reportedly played to "crowded houses" and was described as a "scream" that quickly became "known from coast to coast."<sup>25</sup> The film was such a success that once it completed its exhibition at the States and Pekin theaters, it was later shown at the Grand Theater. The black press applauded Foster's efforts and commented that "while it is a good thing for colored actors to get into the game among the whites, there is nothing like the genuine all-colored pictures produced by the Foster Company . . ."<sup>26</sup> When the film was shown at the Majestic Theater, "patrons jumped up and shouted, some laughed so loud that ushers had to silence them. The manager of the house states that it contains more wit and humor than any picture ever seen at the house."<sup>27</sup>

In review of *The Railroad Porter* and a later production of Foster's, *The Fall Guy* (1913), the black press commended Foster for depicting black life without displaying "the race in a ridiculous light,"<sup>28</sup> even though the films were comedies. Providing encouragement and support, the press similarly noted that with each release, Foster's productions were constantly improving. Although *The Railroad Porter* may have replicated comedies produced by the larger industry, Mark Reid notes a significant difference: "Foster photoplays altered the popular Rastus stereotype by using African-American socio-cultural realities as the content of his films. Some of these realities are the existence of a black middle-class, employed Northern blacks, and blacks who patronize black-owned restaurants."<sup>29</sup>

By the end of 1913, Foster, having gained knowledge of the industry, shared his views on the filmmaking business and articulated his concerns:

This brings us to the question. What is the colored man doing to establish a place for himself in the motion picture world? I am glad to note that he is beginning to move. I mean that he is commencing to weigh the import and to calculate the value of the motion picture as a medium for portraying the finer and stronger features of his particular life. Nothing has done so much to awaken race consciousness of the colored man in the United States as the motion picture. It has made him hungry to see himself as he has come to be. Rather unconsciously it has brought him to a spirit of resentment against the traditional portrayal presented everywhere of the Negro. Hence there have been several instances of picture houses in the colored sections [having] been obliged to "take off" pictures because their colored patrons protested the traditional caricature of their kind projected

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on the screen was not true to life. That this is a healthy sign of the times I think all will agree. . . . I am also predicting phenomenal success for those among us who have the bravery and foresight to wrestle with the problems of production and presentation. For it will require bravery when one takes into consideration the limited experience, the lack of technical knowledge, the deficiencies in business training that are at present attached to the general life of the Negro in this country for a man or a group of men to stake their several talents and whatever they may have of means in motion picture business ventures.<sup>30</sup>

The following year, Foster planned to build a motion-picture studio in Jacksonville, Florida, where “he met his biggest success . . . when the firm of Anderson Tucker, the local bankers . . . authorized [Foster] to secure a site for the Foster studio in the heart of the moving picture colony.”<sup>31</sup> Moving to the South would enable Foster’s company to position itself among some of the more competitive enterprises, such as Lubin, Pathe, Kalem, and others.<sup>32</sup> After achieving some degree of success in Jacksonville, Foster returned to Chicago and shared his views on the industry by declaring,

It’s the first big opportunity ever presented to race businessmen to make money. But they will have to handle the business in a more up-to-date manner than they have done in the past. It was the race’s songs that put America on the map musically, and yet the white has made many of the songs and the man of the race to mop and clean the floor. I heartily endorse the attack of the *Chicago Defender* on the theaters showing pictures that are degrading and making the race ridiculous from every viewpoint. Stealing chickens and similar pictures only appeal to the ignorant class and race-hating whites.<sup>33</sup>

Acknowledging the success of his productions nationally and internationally, Foster reported that his productions were a big hit in Europe.<sup>34</sup>

As Foster operated his filmmaking company, producing a newsreel of *The Colored Championship Base Ball Game* (1914)<sup>35</sup> in addition to feature films, he continued to write for black newspapers. When Aida Overton Walker, stage performer and widow of George Walker of the Williams and Walker team, died in October, Foster paid tribute to this former stage performer.<sup>36</sup> Such distractions, however, may have resulted in his company’s demise, because in 1915 newspaper critic Sylvester Russell criticized Foster’s company for its policy concerning “control,” in that Foster helped the rich “without rebate in aiding to cut off the poor.”<sup>37</sup> This criticism was prompted when Foster encouraged the manager of the Grand Theater, who had experienced a slump in attendance, to replace the usual

vaudeville entertainment with motion pictures as a cost-cutting measure. When audiences expressed a preference for vaudeville, particularly when they saw the racially charged *Nigger* (1915), the theater incurred a loss of revenue, leading the theater manager to relinquish his support of Foster. "After the first night of poor business [the manager] left . . . Foster [and his business partner] to pine and perish . . ." <sup>38</sup> Though Foster initially may have expressed an interest in catering to black audiences, this act seems to demonstrate that he compromised his principles for the sake of making money by showing a film poor in taste. But more importantly, such financial straits demonstrate the struggles that black filmmakers faced—and the extremes to which black filmmakers were willing to resort in order to remain financially solvent.

Despite such obstacles, Foster reiterated his views on the advantages that the motion-picture industry stood to provide:

Without . . . question . . . the moving picture business offers today the biggest field in the world to the American Negro to make money three different ways, to show their real talent to the whole world, not alone America. First, the business offers an opportunity to go into the business on small capital. . . . Second [sic], the field is open for ten or twelve producing firms that [have] a market waiting all over the world for good pictures. Third [sic], it would bring to the light some brilliant players of both sexes; also uncover some real writers who perhaps would die unknown. . . . In a moving picture the Negro would offset so many insults to the race—could tell their side of the birth of this great nation—could show what a great man Frederick Douglass was, the work of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Don Pedro and the battle of San Juan Hill, the things that will never be told only by the Negroes themselves.<sup>39</sup>

Apparently heeding his own advice, Foster released *The Barber* (1916), a film described as having more action in its 900 feet than other comparable longer films.<sup>40</sup> *The Barber* focused on the character of John Willis, a society man who, as a customer in a barbershop, expresses a desire to employ a Spanish music teacher for his wife. Overhearing this conversation, one of the barbers poses as a Spanish music teacher, Alfonso Gaston, by wearing a false mustache, white suit, and Mexican sombrero. The impostor visits the Willis home and encounters several beautiful girls, who become enamored by his talent. When John Willis returns home, his wife informs him that they have found the Spanish music teacher they desired. But Willis recognizes the charlatan and expels him from the home.

Meanwhile, the barber has been followed to the Willis home by a supposed friend, but when the barber is rejected from the home, the barber's

friend, relishing the barber's failure, adds to his humiliation. In retaliation the barber assaults the friend with his musical instrument, resulting in the friend's vow to take out a warrant for the barber's arrest.

The next day, John Willis leaves the city, and in his absence, Mrs. Willis extends an invitation to the barber, because she feels he has been treated unfairly. The barber accepts her invitation, but in his urgency to leave the barbershop for the visit, he accidentally incapacitates a young boy. The young boy decides to seek revenge, and he attempts to meet John Willis at the train station and disrupt the barber's planned rendezvous.

Mrs. Willis, who has been entertaining the barber, hides him in a clothes press when her husband returns home. She convinces John that the barber is not hiding in the house. Meanwhile, the police come to the Willis home, also in search of the barber. When the heat from the press becomes overwhelming, the barber is forced from hiding. He jumps through the window and is chased both by John Willis and by the police. The chase ends when the barber dives into a lake and disrupts a boatload of fishermen.<sup>41</sup>

Foster's ability to evoke humor is apparent in his production of *The Barber*. Moreover, his film includes elements of disguise and a chase scene, as well as a demonstration of how women can be easily deceived by impostors. Perhaps in subtle ways, he offers advice on avoiding deception by the vices that prevailed in the inner city, speaking to the newly migrated black population. Stewart theorizes that "Fears about these large, pleasure-seeking crowds stemmed from concerns about the danger, immorality, and negative effects of State Street's active nightlife on Black families . . . ."<sup>42</sup> Foster's desire to entertain as well as educate may have encouraged him to produce additional films, such as *The Grafters and the Maid* (alternately titled *The Grafters and the Girl*, 1913); *The Butler* (1913), a film that featured a black butler who becomes the hero to a white family; *Mother* (1914), a film characterized as a patriotic production that centered on Chicago's famous regiment and that examined a mother's heroism as she attempted to save her son; *Brother* (191?); *Birth Mark* (191?); *Fool and Fire* (191?); and *A Woman's Worst Enemy* (191?).<sup>43</sup>

Foster may have been disillusioned by the trials of filmmaking when he asked the Lincoln Motion Picture Company for advice. In a letter to Lincoln, Foster proposed,

I am laying a plain question to you. Is there a possibility to make a success in producing colored film dramas and comedies of colored actors to be shown in colored theatres? Will time change [the] conditions [when] Colored Films will become [as] popular from a novelty view in White theatres as Colored acts are in Vaudeville? As to myself, I am at a standstill, waiting for something to turn up. I would like to know your position in handling outside films and if you could handle

my releases. I am again congratulating you for your wonderful effort. I am also wishing you success. Your success means mine in a direct way.<sup>44</sup>

Although frustrated with the motion-picture business, Foster did not relinquish his enthusiasm; by the late 1920s, he was working as an assistant director in Hollywood. Because of Foster's persistence and his undeniable determination, he sparked an editorial on perseverance in the *Pittsburgh Courier*:

Mr. Foster went out to Hollywood last winter. No one seems to know how he got out there because at the time he was blessed with little of this world's goods. But he did have dogged persistence and a thorough confidence in the worth of the Negro film dramas he had written. He said he was going to get in the moving picture game as a writer and director, and he did. He noted the rising interest in the Negro as dramatic material in Hollywood and he decided to get right out there and get in on the ground floor. . . .

There is a lesson in this for those countless members of our group who, after expending a little effort to get ahead are ready to hoist the white flag, damn the Caucasian and admit defeat. There are so few who recognize the supreme importance of perseverance in getting ahead in this world.<sup>45</sup>

Lester Walton also castigated the industry for delaying their recognition of Foster's talents. Walton claimed that, "'Bill' Foster has been endeavoring 'to get the breaks' for a long, long time. And it was not until [Foster] was around sixty and had crossed the country from ocean to ocean that he has finally come into his own."<sup>46</sup> In the article, Walton went on to find fault with studio officials for their continued debasement or derision of blacks on screen.

Why are nine out of ten Negroes in motion pictures expected by producers and directors to say "dis," "dat," and "dese," instead of plain United States [English] as is their custom? The impression seems to prevail that because of their color, American Negroes, despite their presence in this country since 1619 are to be considered as a people with a language all their own. In other words, in order that a Negro be distinguished on the screen he must be under cork and talk different from other fellow Americans.<sup>47</sup>

These warnings may have encouraged Foster in his new capacity as director to produce more representative images of African Americans, as

he attempted to do in *Fool and Fire*. However, it remains unclear whether *Fool and Fire* was an extension of an earlier and similarly titled production—or whether it was ever actually produced. In 1933 a serial of this script appeared in the *California Eagle* from June through September, and although the serial is missing episodes (either because of oversight or because the press did not print the completed version), of the ten episodes that did appear, a substantial segment of the plot remains and deserves attention.

The serial *Fool and Fire* focuses on Lottie Childress, who reads a similarly titled book and is so enthralled by its message that she recites a passage stating, “It’s a fool that clashes to friends, then ignites, then a fire that burns up the fool.”<sup>48</sup> The passage becomes a metaphor for her personal endeavors as she vows to ignore this proclaimed wisdom and become a gold digger. Following her mother’s death, Lottie and her sister, Mary (who pursues a teaching career) try to carry on without adhering to their mother’s beliefs. So when Lottie decides to marry for money by taking on an elderly spouse, she schemes with a partner to extort money acquired from the elderly gentleman’s substantial real-estate holdings. However, because of his declining health, he is transported to Arizona and succumbs shortly after their arrival. Following his death, Lottie returns home to her sister, who stages a social event attended by Professor Bidwell—Lottie’s next victim.

Prior to her pursuit of Bidwell, Lottie ventures to Chicago. There, she mingles with Chicago’s wild side and is pursued by another suitor, Watson—a married man who attempts to buy her affection with his wealth. When he offers her some \$5,000 in cash for her affection, Lottie accepts. For the sake of the money, Lottie leads him on as though she is interested, but then channels her energy and his funds into planning a party with her newfound friend Belle. The party involves drinking, entertainment, and nudity; because of its success, Lottie stages a second gathering, this time in her rented house. She assumes that Watson, who is declining mentally, has been hospitalized, and splurges with his money. But as Lottie’s party is staged, Watson comes knocking at the door. When he is refused entrance, a gunshot interrupts the party—Watson has shot himself on the front steps. Lottie manages to escape prior to the arrival of the police as Watson, who is not injured, declares that the shooting was accidental. Lottie vows to leave town as Watson’s wife approaches Belle regarding Lottie’s exploitation of her husband.

Returning home to escape the havoc she wreaked in Chicago, Lottie turns her attention to Professor Bidwell—who, incidentally, camouflaged his racial identity in order to accumulate his substantial wealth. Eager to acquire Bidwell’s estate, Lottie also develops an attraction for his assistant. Before she can execute her plans to exploit Bidwell, she receives a letter



informing her that Watson's wife is well aware of her exploitation of Watson. Despite this news, Lottie is far too interested in sealing her present fate with Bidwell. She consents to marrying Bidwell, announcing it in the newspaper. For his new bride, Bidwell even purchases a mansion belonging to a former senator.

The serial continued from this point, but it no longer appeared in the newspaper, leaving the end unknown. From the brief synopsis above, we can conclude that Foster constructed an intriguing, complex, entertaining, and informative narrative that foregrounds a woman who epitomizes evil and victimizes men. Although the narrative is climactic, it is also melodramatic, suspenseful, and humorous; if this narrative reflects Foster's filmed works, it is conceivable that through the use of comedy, his works appealed to a wide range of audiences across racial, gender, class, and moral lines.

In review of Foster's productions, Stewart notes that

Foster's familiarity with the African American entertainment scene suggests that his films not only reflected modern Black "realities" but also catered to prevalent Black popular cultural tastes. His unique combination of Black middle-class characters and the generic conventions of comedy enabled him to boast about the progressive, realistic, culturally specific nature of his work (in keeping with uplift ideology) despite the potential for (and long history of) unflattering caricature in comic Black representations.<sup>49</sup>

Undoubtedly, Foster's first ventures were comedies designed to entertain black audiences and may have replicated the comedies produced by the larger industry. Filmmakers recognized that comedies with entertaining scenarios stood to generate profits. Thus the first phase of black filmmaking (as signified by the works of Foster) focused on providing comedies to black audiences—comedies that may perhaps have masked the pain that blacks endured. The second phase, represented in the works of George and Noble Johnson of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, produced racially inspiring narratives that reflected bourgeois interests and values—works that may have been strategically designed to counter the humorous films appropriated by Foster.

## **PHASE II: THE PRODUCTION OF RACIALLY INSPIRING NARRATIVES BY THE LINCOLN MOTION PICTURE COMPANY, OWNED AND OPERATED BY GEORGE P. AND NOBLE JOHNSON**

Represented in the works of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company—a company that produced narratives reflecting the interests of the black bourgeoisie—a second phase of early black filmmaking emerged. On the

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heels of Foster's comedies, the second phase may have evolved in response to the racially denigrating images that proliferated in the productions of nonblack producers. The works produced by Lincoln suggest that black filmmaking was retreating from comedies to embrace more uplifting and serious dramatic representations. Jane Gaines characterizes their productions by suggesting that "The Lincoln narratives, in the best spirit of uplift, were moral tales of self-reliance, resourcefulness, and exceptionality in which the hero's ambitions are achieved in the same way that race prejudice is thought to be overcome—by demonstrations of the way in which he is *just as* accomplished as or *just like* a white hero."<sup>50</sup>

### *History of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company*

When the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was established, it was touted as "distinctly a Racial proposition, owned, operated and financed by our people only—not a white person even being allowed to own one share of stock."<sup>51</sup> Despite these claims of black independence, Henry Sampson reveals that one white, Harry Gant, a cameraman, was affiliated with the company.<sup>52</sup>

The company was organized in May 1916 by two brothers: Noble, a black actor who had worked with Universal, and George. With a capitalization of \$75,000, the two men started the company in Omaha, Nebraska. Its officers included Dr. J. Thomas Smith, vice president and treasurer; Clarence Brooks, secretary and actor; Dudley Brooks, assistant secretary; and Willes O. Tyler, attorney.<sup>53</sup> The company proclaimed that they were "the only producing company at present that is actually producing high grade motion pictures featuring the Race in photoplays of merit minus all humiliating burlesque."<sup>54</sup>

In order to raise money for their productions, the company sold stock certificates and urged blacks to invest. Company executives declared that "we could borrow from the white banking houses by mortgaging our plant, etc., but we would rather ask a few members of our Race who want to make a safe and good investment to join us in increasing our production by taking up some of our capital stock."<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, despite its ambitions, the company was short-lived, because Noble left the company to pursue an acting career in Hollywood, leaving George to establish the National News service and assume employment with the U.S. post office.<sup>56</sup>

George collected entertainment memorabilia until his death, and his collection, the George P. Johnson Film Collection, is currently archived at the University of California in Los Angeles.

### *Productions of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company*

Shortly after the formation of the company, Lincoln released its first feature, *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1917). This film featured a black

civil engineer, James Burton, who graduates from Tuskegee but is faced with rejection when he attempts to land employment with an oil company. He returns home to work for another oil company and discovers that his father possesses similar oil-producing land. Although he is temporarily caught in a scheme where a sister and brother attempt to thwart his chances at love with a longtime admirer, he emerges both wealthy and with the object of his desire.<sup>57</sup>

The *Chicago Defender* characterized the film as “so far ahead of anything of its kind ever seen on the screen that there is nothing that has been shown to compare with it. . . . The story is a great one and is full of tense situations and dramatic action. It is not a comedy, being a clean-cut drama of first class.”<sup>58</sup> Stewart affirms that the film was well received among Chicago’s Black Belt theaters and reveals that “*Realization* was applauded not just for the quality of the acting, writing, and photography, and for its uplifting representation of the finer qualities of the Race, but also because it featured a new setting for race films—the West.”<sup>59</sup>

Lincoln’s second release, *Trooper of Troop K* (1917), was an attempt to capitalize on a cavalry incident that occurred during the Mexican–American War—specifically, during a battle with Troops K and C of the fighting Tenth, an all-black cavalry that was nearly destroyed. With this production, the filmmakers managed to achieve some degree of realism, because they used a number of ex-cavalry troopers, Mexican cowboys, and costumes, and they shot on location in the sandy creek beds of Los Angeles.<sup>60</sup>

The film features Shiftless Joe (played by Noble), who is attracted to Clara Holmes (played by Beulah Hall), a woman from a respectable family who has taken an interest in Joe despite his shiftlessness. Jimmy Warner (played by Jimmy Smith), a much more respectable fellow, is disturbed by Clara’s attraction to Joe. Despite Jimmy’s aversion to Joe, Clara insists on his character and attempts to find him employment. Unfortunately, Joe manages to foil this opportunity and loses his job. Inspired by her younger brother, Clara proposes that Joe should pursue the military, since the army stands to provide the discipline needed. Joe joins the army and becomes affiliated with Company K of the Tenth Cavalry, wherein he wins the approval of his captain and later distinguishes himself by rescuing his wounded captain, as well as staging their escape. His heroic efforts are noted in the newspaper, and Clara reads about his heroism, for which he receives a promotion. Clara even denounces Jimmy for his previous accusations about Joe. When Joe returns home on a leave, he is welcomed by Clara.<sup>61</sup>

Stewart, reviewing a scene from the film, states that, “‘When Joe shot that greaser off the horse at the 8 o’clock show there was a yell let out that almost raised the roof.’ These accounts represent vocal, participatory Black film reception as a testament to the film’s effectiveness, even as it is

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performed at the expense of another 'minority' group."<sup>62</sup> Similarly lauding this film, one critic commented that "I wish to thank the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Inc. for the excellent production of *Trooper of Troop K*, which was shown in our auditorium last evening. Could Noble M. Johnson have heard the applause and the singing of 'My country Tis of Thee' by the audience during the battle scene in the picture, he would have felt rewarded for his clever acting."<sup>63</sup>

With the success of these early pictures, Lincoln produced a third picture, titled *Law of Nature* (1917). Starring Noble (in his last film with the company), *Law of Nature* explores city life. Agnes Vincent, a society woman, accepts a position as governess to two small children on a large ranch in the West. Before heading west, she attends a party given in her honor with an admirer, Henry Bronson. However, once Agnes ventures westward and assumes her new position, she establishes a relationship with a ranch foreman, Jess Allen, who later becomes her spouse. When school ends, Agnes convinces Jess to return east with her, so they can continue their life together. Jess complies with her proposition but is unable to adjust to eastern life. Agnes, disenchanted with Jess, leaves him for her former admirer, Bronson, and Jess decides to return to the West with their infant son. In this new relationship, all is not well, because Agnes is forced to work in a café. After she toils for three years or so, her health declines. Abandoned by Bronson, she realizes that she has made an error in judgment and manages to return to her former spouse, Jess, "just in time to be forgiven dying at her husband's feet."<sup>64</sup>

Exhibited in Chicago, *Law of Nature* was met by "great crowds" and created "record-breaking business."<sup>65</sup> As for the film's Los Angeles exhibition, one reviewer surmised that although Lincoln's previous two releases were good, *Law of Nature* even surpassed these productions.<sup>66</sup> Another reviewer declared, "There is no use talking . . . they will have to take their hats off to the Lincoln Company. Their features are so far superior to the other all-colored productions that there is no comparison. I consider the *Law of Nature* as fine a story and as well acted as one I have shown on the screen here in a long time . . ."<sup>67</sup>

Despite Noble's departure (represented by the absence of the black star), the company continued. Establishing company offices in other cities, promoting its works in black newspapers, and capitalizing on theaters catering to black audiences, the company managed to forge ahead. Lincoln later released *A Man's Duty* (1919)—a film that starred Clarence Brooks. *A Man's Duty* focuses on two males, Richard and Hubert, who compete for the attention of one woman, Myra. To distract Richard in his pursuit of Myra, Hubert encourages him to embark on a drinking binge, which results in Richard spending the night with a prostitute. Richard, attempting to get revenge for Hubert's ploy, challenges him in a fight, and Hubert

receives head injuries, leaving Richard to think that he has murdered Hubert.

Returning to his drinking habits, Richard meets a single woman, Merriam, whom he intends to marry, once he clears his past. Yet when Richard learns that Hubert survived his injuries and that the prostitute whom he previously encountered is pregnant with his child, he decides (with Merriam's encouragement) to return home to marry the prostitute. However, following his return, Richard discovers that he has been deceived by Hubert, who has married Myra as well as fathered the prostitute's child. Despite being deceived by Hubert, Richard is reunited with Merriam at the film's end.<sup>68</sup>

The intrigue created by *A Man's Duty* generated considerable appeal, and the movie was selected as the opening feature at the Liberty Theater in Alexandria, Louisiana. The film even played in St. Louis at the Pendleton, Criterion, and Comet theaters for three consecutive weeks, representing a record in "Negro production."<sup>69</sup> *A Man's Duty* was advertised as "A play deep in theme, thrilling and superb in situation, beautiful in settings, and crystal clear in photography. An unusual and romantic drama of crossed roads and crossed wires in a young man's and young woman's life."<sup>70</sup> Although this film may have been among Lincoln's final features, the company also frequently turned its attention to newsreels, such as *Lincoln News*—a newsreel that included footage of Kelly Miller, dean of Howard University, and Madame Walker's beauty-production business at its original site in Denver.<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, Noble landed an extensive number of parts in Hollywood productions, such as *Under Crimson Skies* (1920) and *Four Horsemen of Apocalypse* (1921).<sup>72</sup> Gaines contends that Universal established a contract with Noble indicating that although Lincoln could use Noble's name and likeness, Lincoln was prohibited from producing new advertising or using existing advertising in new ways to promote its former black star.<sup>73</sup>

Despite Noble's absence, Lincoln produced *By Right of Birth* (1921)—a film that focuses on a black woman of Indian descent, Juanita Cooper, who develops an attraction for a black law-school classmate and popular athlete, Phillip Jones. In an effort to gain money lost because of her gambling habits, Juanita's foster mother (who is white) solicits Manuel Romero, described as an unscrupulous Mexican American stockbroker, to secure oil leases from the Freedmen allottees (black freed former slaves who were allotted land and failed to recognize the value of their assets). Although participating in the money scheme, Romero is also in pursuit of Juanita. However, young law student Phillip intervenes, and a fight and auto chase lead to Romero's death. At the film's end, Juanita's real mother is revealed, and Juanita "comes into fortune and happiness which is hers 'by right of birth.'"<sup>74</sup>

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*By Right of Birth* was shot at the Berwillia studios and featured a cast of white, Indian, and Spanish characters. The film was described as having “action, atmosphere and a really appealing touch of sentiment. The acting of the entire company demonstrates that unusual ability, artistry and dramatic technique possessed by the colored actors and actresses, after all, who are so thoroughly humorous, so perfectly melodious and so competent to draw tears as the colored performer.”<sup>75</sup>

When *By Right of Birth* was shown at the Trinity Auditorium in Los Angeles, some 1,200 people attended its exhibition, paying an entrance fee of between 50 cents and a dollar—an amount regarded as “top dollar for a race production.”<sup>76</sup> The film also was exhibited in St. Louis and Baltimore, where it “held its beholders’ intense interests and evoked outbursts of applause.”<sup>77</sup>

Although with the production of *By Right of Birth*, the Lincoln company demonstrated that even in the absence of its black star, Noble (who was replaced by Clarence Brooks), it could still produce pictures of considerable appeal, the company did not last. Several projects followed the release of *By Right of Birth*, including *The Heart of the Negro*—a film that may have been alternately titled *Black Americans* and that focuses on the attempts by the California Narcotic Board to prevent drug smuggling, as well as Chinese immigration, across the Mexican border.<sup>78</sup> The company also reportedly made a one-reel news pictorial titled *A Day with the Tenth Cavalry*—including scenes of the famous Tenth Cavalry shot by cameraman Harry Gant.

Additionally, the company proposed *Beauty in Ebony*—a film that depicts a black hotel beach property with an employee hired to detect the criminal activity of its “fashionable” occupants.<sup>79</sup> Gaines reports that the company even purchased newsreel footage of black troops in World War I from the French government.<sup>80</sup> However, these productions may never have been completed or publicly released, thus signaling the demise of the company.

A review for *By Right of Birth* noted that “The Lincoln management is due considerable credit for their ability to handle a six-reel photoplay typically racial in appeal, yet free from radical propaganda such as has been characteristic in several similar productions attempted by other concerns.”<sup>81</sup> It is possible that this reviewer was referring to Micheaux’s controversial *Within Our Gates* (1919), indicative of the third phase of early black filmmaking. During this phase, the films turned from racially inspiring narratives to more realistic and controversial narratives that unveiled the provocative racial politics previously avoided in race productions. Lincoln’s demise may have provided the impetus for Micheaux’s film company’s beginning; when Micheaux launched his first filmmaking venture, his picture had been rejected for production by the Lincoln company.

### PHASE III: THE PRODUCTION OF REALISTIC AND CONTROVERSIAL PERSPECTIVES OF BLACK LIFE IN THE WORKS OF THE OSCAR MICHEAUX FILM CORPORATION

In 1918, Micheaux corresponded with the Lincoln Company, informing them of his novel *The Homesteader* and proposing that with considerable improvement to the script based on the novel, he was certain that his work would provide an excellent scenario for screen production. Micheaux further claimed that his plot, which included a white female who was revealed to be black, was characterized as clever, as well as out of the ordinary, adding that “a picture that can feature something that arouses the public beyond the customary interest, is the picture that means money.”<sup>82</sup> Micheaux surmised that although Lincoln’s productions were designed with black audiences in mind, his productions would also be of interest to white audiences. He indicated he would produce romantic stories, as opposed to war stories.<sup>83</sup>

The Lincoln Company declined Micheaux’s proposition, assuming he lacked the necessary technical expertise. In response to their rejection, Micheaux expanded his book-publishing enterprise into a filmmaking company, launching a film career that lasted from 1918 to 1948. He became the most prolific black filmmaker of race productions; his status allowed him to transition from silent to sound cinema—a feat that few others achieved.

#### *Micheaux’s Brief Biography*

Oscar Micheaux, one of eleven children, was born on January 2, 1884, in Metropolis, Illinois, to former slaves Calvin Swann and Belle Willingham Micheaux. As a young adult, Micheaux became a Pullman porter. In 1904, in Gregory, South Dakota, he became a homesteader—one of the few black homesteaders in this region. Working as a farmer in South Dakota, Micheaux also wrote for newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Half-Century Magazine*. These early writings may have fostered his interest in writing novels and led to the publication of several semibiographical novels, which were financially supported by his white, Midwestern neighbors. Micheaux’s early novels include *The Conquest* (1913), *The Forged Note* (1915), and *The Homesteader* (1917).

Following the publication of his third novel, Micheaux expressed an interest in filmmaking and produced his first picture through his newly formed Micheaux Book Publishing and Filmmaking Company—which later became the Micheaux Film Corporation, with offices in Chicago and New York. Micheaux’s writing career was temporarily interrupted when he turned to film production. However, later in his career, he returned to writing novels and published four additional works: *The Wind from Nowhere*

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(1943), *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (1945), *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield* (1946), and *The Masquerade* (1947).<sup>84</sup>

With the formation of his company, Micheaux produced nearly fifty films. Some of these films may have been remakes or rereleases of earlier productions, but only about one third of his productions remain extant. In the late 1920s, Micheaux's company was forced into bankruptcy, and although the business recovered, Micheaux himself was forced to rely on the financial support of others. Despite suffering such setbacks, he persevered, and he represents one of the most important figures in black cinema history.

Prior to his death on March 25, 1951, Micheaux married at least twice: first to Orlean McCracken from Chicago, and second to Alice B. Russell of Montclair, New Jersey. Russell was instrumental in Micheaux's filmmaking company and managed to subvert the legal difficulties that he endured.<sup>85</sup>

### ***Productions of the Oscar Micheaux Film Corporation***

Micheaux, a proponent of both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, internalized Washington's views on thrift and industry and exerted these principles in his filmmaking career. At the same time, Micheaux

**Oscar Micheaux**



*Photofest*



endorsed Du Bois's views on black intellectualism as a means to approach and resolve the dilemmas that African Americans faced at the turn of the twentieth century—dilemmas evident in the socially progressive themes infused in his films. Micheaux involved himself in virtually every phase of the filmmaking process, from scriptwriting and directing to production and promotion. Because of the number of works he produced, Micheaux's film career is best reconstructed by themes or genres, many of which could be classified into multiple categories.

For example, Micheaux's films frequently examined lynchings, racial politics, and sharecropping, as evident in *Within Our Gates* (1919) and *Gunsaulus Mystery* (1921). He also addressed problems such as intraracial discord or discontent in *Birthright* (1924); corrupt black ministers in *Body and Soul* (1925); abusive fathers in *Broken Violin* (1928); and women victimized by or rescued from adverse circumstances in *The Brute* (1920), *Daughter of the Congo* (1930), *Millionaire* (1927), and *Swing* (1938). Micheaux turned his attention to racial passing in *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), *House behind the Cedars* (1924), *Thirty Years Later* (1928), *Exile* (1931), *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *God's Stepchildren* (1938), and *Betrayal* (1948). Black landowning and homesteading provided the focus for films such as *The Homesteader* (1919) and *Virgin of the Seminole* (1922). Like Hollywood filmmakers, Micheaux produced a number of genre films—for example, murder mysteries, like *The Dungeon* (1922), *A Son of Satan* (1924), *Devil's Disciple* (1925), *Spider's Web* (1926), *The Exile* (1931), *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), and *Murder in Harlem* (1935); gangster films, like *Easy Street* (1930), *Temptation* (1936), *Underworld* (1937), *Lying Lips* (1939), and *Notorious Elinor Lee* (1940); and a short musical, *Darktown Revue* (1931). Micheaux also exposed his personal struggles, such as his clashes with film censor boards and his strained relationship with his brother, in films such as *Deceit* (1923), *When Men Betray* (1929), and *Wages of Sin* (1929).<sup>86</sup>

It is virtually impossible to examine all of Micheaux's works, but two films that demonstrate his style as a filmmaker and reveal his vision of black life include *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul*—films produced in the silent era, when he was afforded more creativity and license as a filmmaker. Both films were constructed through the voices or gazes of women who are centered in narratives regarded as controversial. *Within Our Gates* exposes a lynching that is juxtaposed to a rape; *Body and Soul* provides a scathing critique of a black minister who rapes and exploits the daughter of a faithful church member. Micheaux's preoccupation with representing rape speaks of his desire to expose the violation of women, but also speaks of his desire to expose how the powerless are frequently victimized by the powerful. Micheaux's courageous challenging of society's racial politics on screen—with rapes that involve intraracial and interracial couples—might have been an attempt to suggest a similarity between the struggles that blacks

and women face in a white, male-powered society. By examining the rapes in these two films, a critique of Micheaux exposes the victimizing of blacks in a white society.

To examine these films and how they construct rape, it is necessary to draw upon the works of Sarah Projansky, who suggests that rape narratives fall into two camps: films “that depict women’s vulnerability as leading to rape and those that depict the rape of an independent woman as making her vulnerable.”<sup>87</sup> In the case of *Within Our Gates*, Sylvia Landry is the adopted daughter of Jasper Landry, a black sharecropper who is wrongly accused of attempting to murder his white boss; this plot is indicative of the second type of rape narrative.

Sylvia makes her father aware of the economic exploitation he endures at the hands of his white boss, forcing her father to confront his boss. When this white employer is murdered, a black observer assumes that Landry committed the murder. Based on the eyewitness testimony provided by the black observer, a lynch mob is formed to punish Landry (and his family) for his alleged criminal act. Prior to the lynching, the adopted daughter Sylvia returns home to gather additional supplies for their escape. The deceased employer’s brother, Armand, sees her and attempts to violate her, chasing her endlessly. As Armand begins to tear away Sylvia’s clothing, he notices a scar on her chest and realizes that this black woman is his daughter.

Gaines argues that Sylvia’s attempt to flee Armand’s embrace may have been gratifying to black spectators because it signified escape from the wrath of enslavement, but Gaines adds that “Micheaux’s scene as ‘rape’ has a certain political significance since it can be understood as a reaction to that other controversial scene—the ‘Gus chase scene’ from *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915.”<sup>88</sup> Moreover, Gaines claims that “[Armand] Gridlestone’s attack on Sylvia is a protest against all of the master’s sexual encounters with his own slave women, representing these encounters as acts of symbolic incest, since the paternalism of the plantation master encircled slaves in a concept of ‘my family, white and black.’”<sup>89</sup> Michele Wallace contends that this alleged attack on Sylvia by Armand occurs more than once in the film (in a parlor in the North) to demonstrate how Micheaux takes another swipe at the “hypocrisy of white upper-class morality.”<sup>90</sup>

That a father would attempt to rape his own daughter was scandalous, but more than that, the reconstruction of this attempted rape coincides with Projansky’s view that because the educated Sylvia exposed the improprieties inflicted on her father, she therefore deserved to be punished for her independence through the act of rape. Consistent with rape narratives, Sylvia’s independence is frequently rendered visible in public spaces, according to Projansky, and the trait is evident when Sylvia sustains injuries in a car accident earlier in the film.

Another characteristic of the rape narrative is that women are frequently raped before a marriage can occur, and this is similarly observed in *Within Our Gates*. For example, in the film, one of several suitors, Dr. Vivian, expresses his love for Sylvia to Sylvia's cousin, Alma. But Alma attempts to thwart Vivian's desire for Sylvia by exposing her scandalous past. That Sylvia is raped prior to this near marriage is consistent with rape narratives; this shows how Micheaux, through the employment of these devices, created realism.<sup>91</sup>

Moreover, because Sylvia is nearly raped by her white biological father, Projansky suggests that "rape films that foreground race tend, overall, to solidify racial categories, perhaps, 'incorporating' a racialized minority into dominant society, but nevertheless also suggesting the impossibility of shifting what race is."<sup>92</sup> In this instance, Sylvia's mixed racial identity throws into question the racial purity of blackness and whiteness. Thus Micheaux quite cleverly spoke to the racial politics of his day without doing so directly.

It is conceivable that by depicting black female victimization, Micheaux was at the same time speaking of how whites victimize, exert power over, and attempt to control blacks—even though those very blacks could potentially be their own descendants. Micheaux had entered a new period of black filmmaking. One reviewer, applauding the Lincoln Company, may have been condemning Micheaux in stating that Lincoln produced films that avoided "every chance [to] . . . create any race prejudice whatever, much to their credit. Other companies producing Negro pictures might try the same thing."<sup>93</sup>

Micheaux further provoked controversy when he released *Within Our Gates* on the heels of the 1919 race riots that swept the country. Because of the intense racial climate, censors were reluctant to allow Micheaux to exhibit his picture in Chicago, fearing that the depiction of a lynching on screen would reignite these tensions. Nonetheless *Within Our Gates* drew record-breaking crowds when it was shown at the Vendome Theater, where it was advertised as "the greatest preachment against race prejudice [and] it will hold you spellbound."<sup>94</sup> However, the film later disappeared from the United States until the 1980s, when it resurfaced, having been found in an archive in Spain under the title *La Negra*.

Micheaux showed a penchant for controversy in his production of *Body and Soul*, a film that explores black-on-black rape. In this instance, a powerful black male minister exploits and violates an innocent black female—representing Projansky's first type of rape narrative, in which a woman's vulnerability leads to her rape. Although *Body and Soul* was not as racially motivated as *Within Our Gates*, it was no less scandalous. In this film, Micheaux reveals the exploits of a jackleg preacher, Rev. Isaiah Jenkins, a former convict who escapes from prison and ingratiates himself in a church by posing as a morally upright preacher. Despite his public image, Jenkins

privately drinks, gambles, and attempts to extort money from Sister Martha Jane's daughter, Isabelle. Although Isabelle warns her mother that Jenkins is not the good man he presents, her pleas fall on deaf ears; Martha Jane remains oblivious to Jenkins's exploits. While Jenkins forces Isabelle to steal money from her mother to support his illicit activities, Martha Jane, overcome by Jenkins's charm, asks her daughter to marry this criminal posing as a man of the cloth.

However, following Jenkins's rape and abandonment of Isabelle, leaving her to starve and die, Martha Jane is shocked into reality when she visits her daughter on her deathbed. Now Sister Martha Jane vows to retaliate for her daughter's death, rallying church members to physically assault Jenkins. Escaping, Jenkins kills Isabelle's brother. At the film's end, Sister Martha Jane awakens to realize that this was merely a nightmare, and that her daughter is happily married to an inventor, who happens to bear a striking resemblance to Jenkins. (Incidentally both characters are played by Paul Robeson.)

In this rape narrative, Isabelle is depicted as vulnerable, and her vulnerability leads to her rape, implying that women who are not self-sufficient and independent are likely to be raped.<sup>95</sup> Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence note that

the overdrawn innocence of the daughter has a dramatic function: competitive signs (the innocence of a child versus vicious, rampant sexuality) in open conflict. Likewise, the storm setting of the rape accentuates her innocence and inflates the minister's villainy, an excess that makes the signs unambiguous and even more impressive.<sup>96</sup>

The film also conforms to Projansky's views that women frequently agree to elope with a man before the marriage can take place—and in the case of *Body and Soul*, Isabelle is raped before such a marriage occurs. Projansky further suggests that in rape narratives, attempting to disguise femininity or fainting reflects vulnerability, and Isabelle is clearly overwhelmed by Jenkins's exploits at moments in the film. Consistent with Projansky's views, poor or uneducated women are likely to be victimized, and in the case of *Body and Soul*, Jenkins's desire for money propels him to take advantage of Isabelle, demonstrating her vulnerability as an uneducated woman. Moreover, it is not uncommon for women to engage in self-defense following their rape. In this particular film, while Isabelle fails to engage in self-defense, her mother, Sister Martha Jane, wages her own act of self-defense against Jenkins following the exploitation of her daughter. Finally, Projansky proffers that many of these rape narratives are infused with a dream or memory sequence—a characteristic observed in both *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul*.<sup>97</sup> In fact, Charles Musser proclaims that

*Within Our Gates* . . . contains an unusual dream sequence in which Sylvia dreams of a murder (involving a card game) as it actually takes place. Dream and reality merge in ways that are disorienting and disturbing. When she wakes from the nightmare we find her dream was also reality. In *Body and Soul*, Micheaux intertwines flashback with dreams far more extensively, destabilizing the status of the represented event for somewhat different purposes. In this case the film viewer wants the dreamer (Martha Jane) to stop dreaming, to see clearly and to face reality.<sup>98</sup>

Although Micheaux used techniques such as the dream sequence in his rape narratives, perhaps he did so to both implicate and vindicate himself from his more radical commentary on the racial exploitation that African Americans endured. By foregrounding the victimization and vulnerability of black women, Micheaux may have been trying to soften his castigation of the mistreatment of blacks, thus seeming not to sound offensive in a period when racial distinction and controversy were especially impermissible. Both *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul* embody characteristics unique to rape narratives, but at the same time, they signify how Micheaux spoke to the racial politics that prevailed in his era.

When *Body and Soul* was released in theaters, the film was frequently advertised as a Paul Robeson vehicle—a publicity ploy designed to capitalize on Robeson's acting talent. However, when reviewers realized that Micheaux denigrated black ministers in his representation of the corrupt Jenkins, one newspaper commented,

Oh Boy! If some of the Reverends could see how Micheaux pictures the harm done by the Jack-leg Preacher, but, of course, they wouldn't go near that den of iniquity, a theater. And, of course, in Baltimore the women don't buy the Reverend suits, feed them on chicken dinners, hang on their slightest word and force their daughters on their attentions.<sup>99</sup>

Along with the film's problems with certain black audiences, *Within Our Gates* endured its share of censorship struggles and was initially rejected for exhibition in New York, where it was declared as sacrilegious and immoral.

Despite these obstacles, Micheaux ushered in a third phase of black filmmaking in the early period of cinema by providing more realistic representations of black life and provoking controversy in his representations. Whereas Foster seemingly reproduced comedies that were common to the cinema industry, and the Johnson brothers attempted to produce racially inspiring narratives by reflecting the lifestyles associated with the black bourgeoisie, Micheaux's approach to filmmaking ventured away from

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comedies and morally upright representations. Instead, Micheaux proposed a less superficial and more realistic representation of black life, tackling the prevailing racial politics as well as the moral decay and decline that infiltrated the black community.

Perhaps Micheaux, while aiming at creating a market for his works, was at the same time inspiring, educating, and sometimes frustrating black spectators to the point where they might be motivated to rectify the wrongs or ill deeds they had witnessed on screen. Also, Micheaux may have strategically targeted white spectators who might see his works and feel compelled to right the wrongs for which they were responsible.

Micheaux, though criticized by his contemporaries, created films that crossed race, class, and gender boundaries—however distasteful, insulting, or disdainful these representations might have been. The production of such films allowed him to create a niche in black filmmaking as a unique filmmaker who made a lasting mark on black cinema.

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3. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 172; Lester A. Walton, “Chicago’s Bill Foster Gets Movie ‘Breaks,’” Tuskegee Newsclipping File, June 16, 1929; and William Foster’s death certificate.

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## Women in Film

### *Ingrid Banks*

The history of African American<sup>1</sup> women in film is a complex one. Images of African American women on the big screen have shared a connection to stereotypes of black women in the broader society. Therefore, to illustrate such a connection, this chapter presents a discussion of stereotypical images of African American women that have been reproduced over time in mainstream film. Images of African American women that pervade both society at large and film have attempted to present “authentic” or “real” pictures of black women. Yet stereotypes of African American women have said less about the actual identities of black women but a great deal more about how whites imagine black women. Predicated on both racist and sexist beliefs that assume the cultural inferiority of blacks and the cultural superiority of whites, stereotypes of African American women have actually been constructed to justify the social, political, and economic subjugation of black women. As a result, the structural inequalities that black women face in the broader society are ultimately aired on the big screen for entertainment value. In addition, black actresses have faced racism and sexism within their profession. Roles, particularly quality roles as leading ladies, have been hard to come by for black actresses. Early on in the history of motion pictures in the United States, African American women were pigeonholed into playing characters that reinforced second-class citizenship. Even though, over time, roles for African American women increased and diversified<sup>2</sup> in mainstream films, the roles were nevertheless laced with stereotypes.

In moments of “subversive” resistance, several black actresses were able to bring their own interpretations to stereotypical characters. Independent and mainstream films, by black filmmakers, that courted black moviegoers, particularly under segregation, were also platforms for diversified black female characters. However, some of these films reinforced the same stereotypes of African American women that were scripted and directed in mainstream Hollywood movies. Civil rights organizations promoted

resistance strategies as well. During the dawn of the twentieth century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) protested vigorously against the stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in mainstream films.

Therefore the history of African American women in film is inextricably linked to politics, particularly the perceptions of African American women that emerged under enslavement and well into the twentieth century. The mammy, jezebel, tragic mulatta, matriarch, superwoman, and welfare queen or bad black mothers are images indicative of the racial, gender, and sexual politics that black women have endured within and outside the movies.

### THE MAMMY IMAGE

The mammy image of the content domestic servant emerged under slavery. Fat, dark-skinned, happy-go-lucky, docile, asexual, and loyal to the white family, the mammy welcomed servitude, reveling in her status as a slave, thereby proving the beneficence of slavery that those in support of the system believed to be true. With her hair often covered by a handkerchief, the mammy was the antithesis of femininity.<sup>3</sup> With regard to family, if she had kin, the mammy was bossy and unloving, providing ridicule to the male figure in her household and a lesser mothering role to her own children. The mammy reserved her emotions for a loving home for the master's family.

Interestingly, the first black female characters in mainstream film were not black, and often they were not even female.<sup>4</sup> These films date to the silent movie era, during which white men and white women performed the parts of black characters in blackface.<sup>5</sup> Blackface performers emerged during the antebellum period, in minstrel shows, but the practice continued well after, spilling over into the early twentieth century in both silent and talking pictures.<sup>6</sup> One of the very first major motion pictures to cast a white actress in the role scripted for a black actress was *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).<sup>7</sup> The character was the mammy. "She is representative of the all-black woman, overweight, middle-aged, and so dark, so thoroughly black, that it is preposterous even to suggest that she be a sex object. Instead she was desexed. This tradition of the desexed, overweight, dowdy, dark black woman was continued in films throughout the 1930s and 1940s."<sup>8</sup>

The mammy figure was depicted in films that told stories of the Old South during the antebellum period, as well as those focusing on Reconstruction and thereafter. Louise Beavers was the first important black actress to put a stamp on the mammy figure in earlier Hollywood films; because a fair number of roles written for black women were as domestics, she found a great deal of work. She was described as "a big-boned, robust

woman with skin that was . . . as smooth as chocolate velvet, and eyes bright, large, and wondrously naïve.”<sup>9</sup> Although Beavers was not as large as other black females who portrayed the mammy figure, she was groomed to play the cook, domestic, or maid characters that were written for black women, clearly displaying the characters’ unyielding devotion to the white family during enslavement or during other historical moments, most notably the Depression era. Perhaps one of Beavers’s most endearing roles<sup>10</sup> was in the original version of *Imitation of Life* (1934). She plays the role of Aunt Delilah, a widowed black mother who has fallen on hard times during the Depression. Delilah meets Miss Bea, a white widowed mother who is struggling to make a living as well. In exchange for a place to live, Delilah becomes the maid and provides child care for Miss Bea’s daughter while Miss Bea attempts to find work. Miss Bea soon discovers that Delilah has an amazing pancake recipe, so the two women go into business together. (Delilah continues her duties as maid.) The business is a success and, when Miss Bea offers Delilah a percentage of the company and explains that Delilah can now buy her own house and car, Delilah is crushed, wondering if Miss Bea is trying to send her away. “How I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie if I ain’t here? I’s your cook. And I want to stay your cook.”<sup>11</sup> Donald Bogle explains: “Of the pancake recipe, Delilah says, ‘I gives it to you, honey. I makes a present of it.’ Her submissiveness merely justifies Bea’s exploitation.”<sup>12</sup> Delilah is the faithful servant, wanting more for her white employer, her mistress, than she wants for herself. Beavers portrayed the mammy writ large for a Depression-era white audience that was pining away for the days of prosperity while simultaneously reassuring their racial sensibilities about black servitude and loyalty. Beavers starred in several other movies in which she played the mammy figure. Ironically, she hated to cook.<sup>13</sup>

Although Beavers was the first black actress to play many mammy roles on the big screen, Hattie McDaniel was perhaps the most well known among those playing the mammy figure. Unlike Beavers, McDaniel was the physical epitome of the description of the mammy. McDaniel was not big boned: she was large and big bosomed. Like many black actors and actresses during the earlier part of the twentieth century who portrayed roles that reinforced black inferiority, McDaniel was often criticized for agreeing to play such demeaning characters. Critics charged that she was complicit in belittling African Americans as a race. Unlike earlier black actresses portraying the mammy, McDaniel interpreted many of her roles as including an irreverent bossiness that she wielded to all in her path, black and white alike, and soon her roles as the mammy were scripted in this fashion. Yet this too was caricatured and predicated on the “real” behavior of black women. As a result, McDaniel’s critics continued to hold her accountable. “Often criticized because of her stereotype characters,

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she answered her critics just as tartly as she might have answered an employer in one of her movies, 'Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one!' McDaniel's statement gives a true picture of the options available to black performers of the 1930s."<sup>14</sup> McDaniel's statement provides a true picture of the job opportunities that were available to African American women during the 1930s. The work to which black women were relegated in the movies was the same work that they did in reality.

McDaniel played the mammy role in several films, but *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is the most well known; the film was a monumental epic, portraying the Old South during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Yet, most important, McDaniel won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress that year. She was the first black woman to win the award. Much to the chagrin of civil rights organizations and individual blacks who criticized McDaniel for playing Mammy—the actual name of her character in the film—the granting of the award seemed to go beyond McDaniel's talents as an actress; many believed that she was simply being awarded for portraying black women in ways that served to appease the racial sensibilities of whites. Even though

**Vivien Leigh (as Scarlett O'Hara) and Hattie McDaniel (as Mammy) in Victor Fleming's 1939 film *Gone With The Wind*.**



MGM/Photofest

McDaniel's mammy figure talked back to whites, she was nevertheless the faithful servant to the white family, and the character served as yet another defense of slavery. McDaniel brought a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the character, thereby displaying excellent acting abilities; nevertheless, Mammy gave credence to the inferiority of African Americans.

## THE JEZEBEL IMAGE

The jezebel image emerged under slavery as well; however, unlike the mammy, the jezebel was the epitome of sexuality. Under the image of jezebel, African American women were perceived as lewd and lascivious, with a ravenous sexual appetite. Black women's bodies were believed to be the site of uninhibited sex. As a result, white male slave masters were able to disregard the apparent contradiction in their sexual abuse of women whom they believed to be less than human and outside the realm of femininity. That is, women with such salacious desires could never be sexually abused, because having plentiful sex was central to their identity as African American women. In essence, the jezebel image presented the black woman as the quintessential whore.

In Hollywood films, the jezebel was actually very much a symbol of femininity, but not the kind associated with the chastity and piety that only white women, particularly those in the middle class, could possess.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the jezebel character was the epitome of a wild, sultry, seductive, mysterious, exotic sexuality that stopped men in their tracks. Black actresses selected for jezebel roles possessed lighter skin tones and were often portrayed by the "tragic mulatta" image. (A discussion of the tragic mulatta follows.) But it is jezebel's promiscuity that is central to the current discussion.

According to Donald Bogle, Nina Mae McKinney became the first recognizable black actress in the movies and its first black whore.<sup>16</sup> In MGM's all-black cast film *Hallelujah!* (1929), she played Chick. "In McKinney's hands and hips, Chick represented the black woman as exotic sex object, half woman, half child."<sup>17</sup> Although McKinney gained fame with *Hallelujah!*, she never had the opportunity to capitalize on that notoriety. Unlike the supporting role of the mammy characters, there were few roles for black leading ladies in Hollywood, even if they were light skinned. Hollywood pictures reflected the fear and tension concerning miscegenation in the United States, particularly among white supremacists. To cast a well-known black leading lady alongside a well-known white leading gentleman in the late 1920s would have ruffled far too many feathers, not to mention resulted in lost revenue, particularly in Southern markets, for major movie studios. Furthermore, Hollywood backed off on presenting black male leads as humanized, romantic, sexual beings alongside black women—and

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certainly not alongside white women, which would not have boded well with whites who were comfortable with seeing black men as servants or brutes.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, McKinney's apex began and ended with *Hallelujah!*

Thirty years later, Dorothy Dandridge faced the same struggle as McKinney. Like McKinney, Dandridge was cast as the black vamp. And, like McKinney, she suffered the fate of beautiful black actresses whose mulatta physical features helped but also hindered their access to roles in major motion pictures. Given the relationship between the images of black women as vamps and tragic mulattas, the following section discusses the tragic mulatta and some of the most well-known black actresses who were cast in these roles.

### THE (TRAGIC) MULATTA IMAGE

The mulatta, often referred to as the tragic mulatta, represents the "curse" of miscegenation. The mulatta is black and white, what many now term "mixed race," yet she is black by virtue of the "one drop rule."<sup>19</sup> Yet the quintessential mulatta attempts to "pass" as white: she possesses the light skin, lighter eyes, and straighter hair that are the physical markers of whiteness in the United States. In other words, her features are refined, genteel, bespeaking of a beauty and femininity that is the antithesis of the "typical" African American woman and, most certainly, the mammy. Yet the mulatta can never escape her blackness, thereby causing great mental and emotional anguish that can ultimately lead to tragedy.

In discussing fiction written by whites between 1920 and 1955, Lisa M. Anderson argues that three types of tragic mulatta characters emerged: "One is the divided-soul character who desires a white lover/husband and suffers a tragic fate as a result. Another is the unhappy passing mulatta who denies her race and dies. The third is the exotic, restless, and mysterious mulatta, who is inherently a sexual character."<sup>20</sup> Yet the divisions in portrayals of the mulatta on the big screen are not as clear as Anderson states: the mulatta can possess two or even all three of the characterizations that Anderson presents. In addition, the tragedy for some mulattas eventually ends in a greater sense of self. Although Jeanne Crain, a white actress, was cast in the lead for the 1949 film *Pinky*, the film nevertheless presents a typical tale of the mulatta passing for white.

"More than any other film in which a white has played a black role, *Pinky* typified the movie industry's methods of grasping audience identification."<sup>21</sup> *Pinky* is a light-skinned black woman who leaves the southern United States to attend nursing school in the North. While there, *Pinky* eschews her blackness, opting to pass for white. In doing so, she makes a life for herself as a nurse and plans to marry a white male physician. On a visit back to her home in the South, *Pinky* must face the malcontent of



several blacks in the community. With the help of her grandmother and a sickly senior white woman whom Pinky cares for, Pinky realizes that she can no longer deny her roots. She remains in the South to run a black nursing clinic, thereby ending her engagement and her days of passing for white in the North. However, prior to *Pinky*, *Imitation of Life* (1934) had taken up the issue of the tragic mulatta passing for white.

Louise Beavers played Aunt Delilah in *Imitation of Life*, and her daughter, light-skinned Peola, was portrayed by black actress, Fredi Washington. Peola has a clear disdain for black people, even her own mother.<sup>22</sup> In the film Aunt Delilah gently scolds Peola for passing, stating that, like her light-skinned father, Peola wrestles with her skin color. Unlike Pinky, Peola does not have a moment of self-awareness in which she embraces her blackness,<sup>23</sup> but the audience bears witness to Peola's humiliation in particular scenes where she is exposed as black. Perhaps the most humiliating scene is when Peola arrives late to her mother's funeral. She is broken, the perpetual tragic figure. Ironically and unfortunately, Fredi Washington experienced heartbreak in her career as a light-skinned black actress in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

"It was always a problem casting [Fredie Washington], for, like Peola, Fredie Washington was a black girl who looked white. Her features were sharply defined, her hair long, dark, and straight, and her eyes a vibrant green."<sup>24</sup> Donald Bogle notes that African Americans of the time saw Washington as a role model, a black actress with enough talent and beauty to win leading lady roles. However, it was because of her looks within the context of her racial background that made leading roles for such a beauty impossible. Not unlike Nina Mae McKinney, Washington's blackness worked against her in an age when black actresses, even those who could pass for white, were unable to land leading roles. Mammy roles were easier to come by for those fitting the part.

Another famous black actress to land mulatta roles was Dorothy Dandridge, who has been referred to as the quintessential mulatta figure.<sup>25</sup> Like Nina Mae McKinney before her, Dandridge's characters infused a vamp quality within the tragic mulatta image. *Carmen Jones* (1954) stands as the template for the Dandridge mulatta performance.<sup>26</sup> The all-black cast film was a huge commercial success. Harry Belafonte (as Joe) starred opposite Dandridge's character—the vivacious, promiscuous, sexual temptress, Carmen. As such, Carmen was the epitome of the black whore stereotype, thereby illustrating the relationship between the tragic mulatta and the jezebel image. Carmen is at once confident and insecure. After using her "feminine wiles" to convince Joe to desert the United States Army, Carmen leaves him for another man. Yet her unfaithfulness leads to Carmen's downfall: Joe kills her out of love and hate.

Harry Belafonte (as Joe) and Dorothy Dandridge (as Carmen Jones) in Otto Preminger's 1954 film *Carmen Jones*.



20th Century Fox/Photofest

*Carmen Jones* ushered Dandridge in as one of the era's movie superstars. The press was obsessed with every move that she made, both professional and private.<sup>27</sup> Her portrayal of Carmen garnered the first-ever Oscar nomination for Best Actress to go to a black woman. Yet, like McKinney and Washington before her, Dandridge faced discrimination within the movie industry. "Despite the great fanfare and recognition after her triumph in 1954, Dorothy Dandridge sadly discovered there was no place for her to go. Bigotry and bias still had their place in Hollywood. Very few film offers came her way. Those that did were little more than variations on Carmen. Always she was to be cast as exotic, self-destructive women."<sup>28</sup> Sadly, the tragedy that pervaded her typecast roles seemed to mirror aspects of her life; Dandridge died of a drug overdose in 1965.

Although Lena Horne began gracing the silver screen after McKinney and prior to Dandridge, the present discussion of the mulatta ends with

Horne. Horne's roles place her in Anderson's third category: "the exotic, restless, and mysterious mulatta, who is inherently a sexual character."<sup>29</sup> Because of her mulatta physical features, Horne was cast in vampish, temptress roles early in her career. Often with her arms draped around a column, wearing a figure-flattering dress and singing her heart out, Horne was cast in roles that presented her as a sex object. Realizing early the rigid typecasting of black actresses, Horne noted: "They didn't make me into a maid . . . but they didn't make me into anything else either. I became a butterfly pinned to a column singing away in Movieland."<sup>30</sup> Horne was speaking of her very small role in *Thousands Cheer* (1943). This was the case for many of her early film appearances. Typically Horne entered one scene, sang a song or two—spotlighting both her talent as a singer as well as her sex appeal—and exited. She made two other movies that year that continued the pattern of her typecasting, yet she actually played important roles in both films. Unfortunately, they were the only two films in her career in which she played characters that were central to the plot. Both films were all-black cast musicals made by Hollywood studios (MGM and Twentieth Century Fox).

In *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), Horne played the temptress Georgia Brown, sent by the devil to help in his effort to win the soul of leading man Little Joe Jackson. Ethel Waters portrays Petunia, Little Joe's good wife, the antithesis of Georgia. Georgia flirts and flaunts in Little Joe's presence, wearing figure-flattering clothes. *Stormy Weather* (1943) was Horne's biggest role; she played the lead female romantic role alongside Bill Robinson. The film tells of the up-and-down relationship between Horne (Selina) and Robinson's (Bill) character. Once again, Hollywood studios were clearly more interested in spotlighting Horne's voice and figure than her acting talents in a leading role, even one with an all-black cast. Not unlike several black actresses before and after her, Lena Horne fell victim to limited roles, and those that were available were clear in presenting her as the sexy entertainer and tease.

## THE MATRIARCH IMAGE

The matriarch image of African American women emerged most prominently in the mid-twentieth century during the height of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. The African American matriarch was of particular concern to the U.S. government; she was given center stage in the 1965 Moynihan Report.<sup>31</sup> Spear-headed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the report purported to present a "true" picture of the problems facing black families, such as poverty, crime, juvenile delinquency, lack of education, and so on. At cause was the weakness in the structure of the black family. Whereas U.S. society was based on patriarchal norms, where men head households, black families operated in a matriarchal structure, where African American women rule.

As a result, their female counterparts emasculate black men. This, argued Moynihan, was abnormal and dysfunctional. Unless the weakness in the black family structure was corrected, African American communities would continue to falter. That is, until black men were able to take their rightful place as heads of black families, black people would never progress in U.S. society. Centered on the premise of “blaming the victim of racial discrimination,” the matriarch image vilified single black mothers for heading their households in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The systematic racism and sexism faced by poor African American women heading households was debunked, letting the government off the hook in having a hand in the very problems within black communities that the Moynihan Report documented.

Perhaps the most important film to portray the matriarch was adapted from Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961). As a black playwright, Hansberry portrayed the struggles facing urban blacks in a complexly realistic and humanistic fashion. Although public policy vilified the black matriarch, Hansberry attempted to illustrate how a black family survived in spite of institutionalized racism. However, because Lena Younger, played by Claudia McNeil, is the head of a household that included a grown daughter and a grown son, along with his own wife and young son, the image of the emasculating matriarch nevertheless prevails. Mrs. Younger, a widower, is left with ten thousand dollars from an insurance policy taken out by her late husband. Residing in a tiny apartment on the south side of Chicago, Mrs. Younger decides that the money will be used to buy a house in the integrated suburbs of Chicago, much to the chagrin of her son Walter, played by Sidney Poitier. He wants to invest the money in a liquor store, along with some friends in the south side neighborhood. Benethea, the daughter, played by Diana Sands, wants to use the money to continue her college education. However, Mrs. Younger is steadfast in her decision to move the family to a house in a better neighborhood as a means to ensure a better quality of life for all. Walter is especially disconcerted by his mother’s decision; he is not only emasculated by white society—given the subservient job that he must endure as a chauffeur to a white man—but also by his own mother, who refuses to allow him to take his “rightful” place as head of the family in the aftermath of his father’s death. Thus, what was presented in public policy debates about the matriarchal structure of black families was introduced in film as well. Even though the matriarch is strong and willing to do whatever it takes to protect her family, inevitably she is seen as going against what is best for her family, by public policy and family members alike.

Perhaps the only film to portray a strong black female character in a matriarchal leading role that challenged the vilification of the strong mother figure was *Sounder* (1972). Set in Louisiana during the Depression

Cicely Tyson and Kevin Hooks in Martin Ritt's 1972 film *Souder*.



*20th Century Fox/Photofest*

era, the film chronicles the struggles of a family of sharecroppers,<sup>32</sup> the Morgans. Although the film presented blacks in roles that reinforced the continued subjugation of blacks in the South well after enslavement, Cicely Tyson's role as Rebecca in the film went against the grain of films featuring black actresses as the matriarch. For one thing, she was married. However, when her husband Nathan, portrayed by Paul Winfield, is convicted of stealing meat to feed his family and must serve a prison term, Rebecca takes up the role of both matriarch and patriarch, caring for her three children while also working to keep the land fertile until her husband's return. Because the character of Rebecca was written in a rich and thoughtful manner, Tyson was allowed to bring her talent as a dramatic actress to the

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screen. Donald Bogle reports that Tyson “became the first dark black woman in American films to play leading, serious, dramatic roles.”<sup>33</sup> Tyson’s performance thrilled audiences and critics alike, garnering an Oscar nomination for Best Actress in 1972.<sup>34</sup> Still, like so many before her, Cicely Tyson later found herself without great dramatic roles to play on the big screen.

### SUPERWOMAN

The superwoman image of African American women in film combined sexiness and violence into titillating plots for audiences, particularly among heterosexual male viewers. The superwoman image presented black women as the action heroines of their communities, willing to protect family and community by any means necessary. The superwoman image portrayed black women as strong and invincible. The message was sent that black women could endure and overcome all odds. The danger

**Pam Grier in William Girdler’s 1975 film *Sheba, Baby*.**



*American International/Photofest*

in constructing black women as unaffected by adversity fed into the belief that dismantling institutionalized forms of discrimination through public policy would prove unnecessary, because black women were ultimately in charge of their own destiny as well as that of the black community. This portrayal of African American women in film was an interesting counter to the matriarch image in that, whereas the superwoman was celebrated for being proactive within the realm of family and therefore community, the matriarch was vilified for her actions in support of family.

A second and equally problematic image of the superwoman was that it reinforced the stereotype of black women as “mean,” “angry,” “bitchy,” “full of attitude,” and the like. The paradox here is clear. Superwomen are at once nurturing and yet unyielding and angry. Perhaps one could make the argument that, at least, the superwoman image in films allowed for a multidimensional character, yet stereotypes of African American women still persisted. The image of the superwoman emerged during the blaxploitation<sup>35</sup> film era of the 1970s. Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson were icons of the superwoman character. Pam Grier was the queen.

Although mainstream Hollywood studios were uninterested in producing films for an African American market in the early 1970s, one “B” studio,<sup>36</sup> American International Pictures (AIP), felt differently. Prior to producing many of the blaxploitation films in the 1970s, AIP had a history of making exploitative films.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, unlike major studios at the time, AIP was quite comfortable in portraying black female characters that were rough and tough, yet sexy and caring. When Pam Grier portrayed the black female heroine in *Coffy* (1973), it was the first time that a gun-toting urban African American female in search of justice was seen on the screen. The character Coffy was portrayed as a vigilante, seeking revenge on the drug dealers who were responsible for turning her sister into an addict, resulting in the sister overdosing into a vegetative state. When she was not plotting and acting out violent retribution on behalf of her sister and black communities plagued by drugs, Coffy was a registered operating-room nurse. Grier was not the mammy or the tragic mulatto of earlier days in film, but her character exuded a sensuality that was reminiscent of roles played by Nina Mae McKinney and Dorothy Dandridge. Even though Grier’s sexuality was used in name of the good for the greater black community, her roles in *Coffy* and, the following year, in *Foxy Brown* (1974) continued in the tradition of objectifying black women’s bodies for mainstream consumption. However, some feminist scholars have argued that both *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* were empowering roles and that Grier was actually the first black action film heroine.<sup>38</sup> The argument is indeed compelling alongside roles that extolled the mammy, jezebel, and tragic mulatto. Nevertheless, Grier was chastised a great deal for playing roles that, many argued, demeaned black women. Critics overlooked *Coffy* and

Foxy Brown as protectors of black communities, perhaps because portrayals of black women as superwomen in film reinforced the belief that “strong” black women were actually the black community’s downfall, because such women laid the foundation for the emasculation of black men. Herein lies the relationship between the image of the superwoman and the matriarch.

Criticism notwithstanding, few critics failed to see the breakthrough in portraying black women as action heroines on the big screen.<sup>39</sup> No longer the mammy or the tragic mulatto, the black female action star was an empowering and intimidating figure. In addition, critics failed to understand the limited roles that were available to black actresses. Not much had changed from earlier periods—black female characters were scripted in stereotypical ways. Like those black middle-class critics,<sup>40</sup> black actresses, too, were working to hold together their own homes and families.

## WELFARE QUEEN AND BAD BLACK MOTHER

The welfare queen, similar to the matriarch, is a more contemporary image of African American women. Emerging during the latter part of the twentieth century, the stereotype is also predicated on the dysfunctional structure of the black family, yet the welfare queen image goes a step further by adding a “deviant” quality to the matriarchal image. The welfare queen image presents poor black women as lazy and perpetual debts to society: their only “goal” in life is to bear children and live off the government through AFDC.<sup>41</sup> The welfare queen is perceived as promiscuous because her many children are the consequence of sexual unions with various men. The welfare queen holding a job<sup>42</sup> is seen as a “cheat”; she earns wages yet takes money from the government.<sup>43</sup> Implicit in the image of the welfare queen is that she too emasculates black men, per the Moynihan Report,<sup>44</sup> because she has no need for a husband, given that single black motherhood is her only station in life.

In addition, poor single black mothers are presented as “bad mothers.” They are the very antithesis of what it means to be a mother in the nurturing sense. Most are young and stereotyped as drug abusers. In film, this image was presented in Halle Berry’s role as a crack addict in *Losing Isaiah* (1995). Berry’s character, Khalia Richards, leaves her son Isaiah in an abandoned dwelling where she and others are squatters. Promising to return, she places a cover over a box that beds Isaiah. The next day, as the trash is being picked up, sanitation workers discover Isaiah as they are about to dispose of the box. Later, when Khalia returns, Isaiah is gone. Khalia’s character goes into rehab and subsequently attempts to get Isaiah back.

Berry’s portrayal of the bad black mother continued in *Monster’s Ball* (2001). Although her character, Leticia, was not addicted to drugs, she was



the epitome of the bad black mother. Leticia is a poor black single mother<sup>45</sup> and her son, Tyrell, is grossly overweight because she has not properly supervised his eating habits. Although she has been advised of the health issues associated with childhood obesity, she clearly has not managed her son's eating habits as a good mother would. Tyrell dies and Leticia is distraught. As the film progresses, Leticia forms a relationship with a white male prison guard, portrayed by Billy Bob Thornton. During their first sexual encounter, the scene presents raw, sexual passion. Many critics felt that Berry's character reinforced the image of black women as bad mothers, as well as jezebels possessing an insatiable sexual appetite. Berry's performance led to her being the first African American woman to win the Oscar for Best Actress. As in the case of Hattie McDaniel's Oscar for Best Supporting Actress decades before, many critics noted that Berry was conferred an Oscar for a role that reinforced particular stereotypes of black women. Yet Berry was not the first black female actress to be nominated in the Best Actress category for her role as a poor black single mother.

In the 1974 film, *Claudine*, Diahann Carroll portrays a single black mother with six children, living on welfare in Harlem. To supplement monthly welfare checks, Claudine works as a maid for a white family in the suburbs, unbeknownst to her welfare caseworker. Claudine and her children live in a small Harlem flat, far too small for seven people to inhabit, but the family manages. The white female caseworker is literally charged with monitoring Claudine's life.<sup>46</sup> When the caseworker embarks on a surprise visit to Claudine's apartment, she is quick to remind Claudine that welfare requirements restrict recipients from working, having a man living in the home, or accepting gifts from a male suitor. Violating the rules, the caseworker admonishes, will result in disqualification from welfare. The film was a social commentary on the welfare system and how it actually aided in the poverty of poor black families headed by a single female. The absence of the black male in black families, as chronicled by the Moynihan Report, was actually supported by the government itself. As such, the film provided an important critique of the welfare system. One song from the movie soundtrack, "Mr. Welfare Man," includes such lyrics as "Keep away from it, Mr. Welfare . . . Though I made some mistakes, for goodness sakes, why must he help mess up my life . . . They keep sayin' I'm a lazy woman, don't love my children and I'm mentally unfit."<sup>47</sup>

Although Diahann Carroll's character was a responsible black single mother who was taking care of her kids—the opposite of the crack mother and bad mother that Halle Berry played in her respective films—the image of the black single mother as the image of women on welfare continues to be pervasive.<sup>48</sup> When packaged in films, these images therefore reinforce stereotypes of black women that exist within the broader U.S. society. By the time that Diahann Carroll starred in *Claudine* and Halle Berry in

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*Monster's Ball*, roles for black actresses were more diverse in comparison to the early part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, black actresses in Hollywood films continued to be cast in roles that reinforced particular stereotypes of black women, even when they were written or directed by blacks, particularly men.<sup>49</sup> What was the scene like for independent black filmmakers and their treatment of black female characters?

### INDEPENDENT BLACK FILMS AND IMAGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

The history of black independent filmmaking begins in the early twentieth century; black filmmakers produced “shorts” or short stories, yet the production of full-length movies burgeoned in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>50</sup> Bogle asserts: “While the mainstream of Hollywood filmmakers demeaned and ridiculed the American Negro, an underground movement gave rise to a group of independent filmmakers who flourished in the late 1920s and the 1930s. They tried to present realistic portraits of Black Americans, but more often than not were trapped by the same stereotype conceptions as their white competitors. And always they were plagued by financial, technical, and distributing problems.”<sup>51</sup> Often termed “race movies,” these films produced for the black market also afforded work for black actors at the time. In such films, black men and women played the very leading roles that they were denied in Hollywood films. African American actresses such as Louise Beavers, Nina Mae McKinney, and Lena Horne gained exposure with black audiences, as well as early experience in film.<sup>52</sup>

The most prolific of the black independent filmmakers of his time was Oscar Micheaux. He produced well over thirty pictures during a thirty-year span from 1918 to 1948. With regard to roles for African American actresses, Micheaux’s casting choices were similar to those of major Hollywood studios in their casting of white actresses as leads. Micheaux typically cast light-skinned black women (and men) in leading roles. He marketed his leading ladies as the “the Negro Harlow” or “the sepia Mae West.”<sup>53</sup> Many of Micheaux’s movies mirrored Hollywood scripts, but with a race theme. His goal was to produce films that portrayed middle-class to bourgeoisie life as a way to counter the subservient role of blacks that was depicted in so many Hollywood films at the time. Yet he could not get away from a particular color caste in his choice of actresses and actors.

In 1986 Spike Lee emerged as an important independent black filmmaker with his mixture of comedy and drama in *She's Gotta Have It*. The film chronicles the life of Nola Darling, portrayed by Tracy Camila Johns, a young black woman with three black male lovers. She has a career as a graphic artist and welcomes the personal and sexual freedom that comes with not being tied down, even though the men in her life pressure her to choose one man. By the end of the film, she acquiesces and chooses one

lover. Many applauded Lee for making a film about a black woman who was unwilling to submit to socially defined gender roles for women, but others pointed out flaws in Lee's depiction of African American women. "Lee walks a fine line between recreating jezebel and creating a realistic female character with a positive sexuality . . . [f]ar from dissenting from old racist stereotypes of black women as sexually irresponsible, Lee helps legitimate it and gives it new life."<sup>54</sup>

In *School Daze* (1988), Spike Lee tackled the complex issue of skin color and hair hierarchies within black communities, particularly with regard to black women. In one scene in the film that chronicles life at a Southern black college, Lee illustrates the skin color and hair tensions by presenting the "Wannabees" (light-skinned blacks with straighter hair) and "Jiggaboos" (darker-skinned blacks with curlier and kinkier hair)<sup>55</sup> showing mutual contempt for each other through song and dance. Although Lee depicted black women in the film as one-dimensional characters for male pleasures, he nevertheless illustrated the diversity among black female physical types by dealing with standards of beauty within black communities, albeit in a comedic manner.

Julie Dash, a black female independent filmmaker trained at New York City College, the American Film Institute, and the University of California at Los Angeles, wrote, directed, and produced *Daughters of the*

#### Spike Lee's 1998 film *School Daze*.



Columbia Pictures/Photofest

*Dust* (1990). Dash's depiction of black women was different than Spike Lee's in that she not only presented the physical diversity among black women, but, unlike Lee, Dash created multidimensional, complex black female characters. The film tells the story of the Peazant family's final days on the South Carolina Sea Islands (Gullah Islands) prior to their move to the mainland in 1902. The film centers on the experiences of the women in the family, with eighty-eight-year-old Nana Peazant, played by Cora Lee Day, as the matriarch. Nana Peazant is against the move because she believes that the family will lose its cultural roots by leaving Ibo Landing. Viola Peazant, played by Cheryl Lynn Bruce, supports the move to the mainland. She is a god-fearing Christian woman and fancies herself refined, cultured, and all-knowing in the ways of middle-class respectability on the mainland. Barbara O portrays Yellow Mary, named so because of her light skin color. She returns to Ibo Landing with her girlfriend, Tula, after a long hiatus. After living and struggling in the very modern world that Viola celebrates, Yellow Mary is happy to welcome the life that Nana Peazant attempts to preserve. Hagar Peazant, played by Kaycee Moore, is Nana Peazant's daughter-in-law; like Viola, she welcomes the move to the mainland. She wants a better life for her daughters, believing that, whereas Ibo Landing is backward, the mainland promises a life of modernity. Eula Peazant, played by Alva Rogers, marries into the family as well. She and her husband Eli embrace the traditions and rituals that Nana Peazant continues to hold dear. Eula is pregnant and, after she is raped by a local white planter, she refuses to reveal his identity for fear that Eli will exact revenge and therefore meet his death.

Dash was praised for doing what so many other filmmakers, black and white, independent and mainstream, had failed to do or failed to do adequately: portray black women in roles that illustrated diversity and depth.

## CONCLUSION

The discrimination that African American actresses have endured in landing roles in major Hollywood films is reflective of the inequality that black women face in U.S. society. Even though black women today are faring better than in earlier periods, black actresses are least likely to be cast in leading roles except for films with an all-black or predominantly black cast. In addition, although the stereotypes of black women in film have been remixed—to satisfy a post-civil rights, integrationist, colorblind, movie-going audience—they continue to prevail. Even though much has changed since the first images of African Americans graced the silver screen, much has also remained the same.

## NOTES

1. In this chapter, I use the terms "African American" and "black" interchangeably.

2. In comparison to roles early in the film industry.

3. See Marlon Riggs's *Ethnic Notions* (California Newsreel, 1987) for a discussion about the mammy figure in relationship to femininity and the white mistress.

4. See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

5. Originating in the late eighteenth century in the United States, blackface was the act of whites, particularly men early on, performing caricatures of blacks as "darkies" or "coons" in minstrel shows. White blackface performers rubbed burnt cork, greasepaint, or shoe polish to blacken their skin. Using white makeup and red lipstick, blackface performers on stage often exaggerated the size of their lips. Wigs, gloves, or torn clothes were often worn as well. Blackface soared in the nineteenth century as the first form of popular entertainment in the United States: whites flocked to minstrel shows. Blackface performance continued into the early twentieth century during the silent movie era and in the beginning of talking pictures.

6. In 1927 Al Jolson's various minstrel performances in blackface in *The Jazz Singer* made the film a huge success for Warner Brothers. In the film, Jolson belts out a heartfelt tune, "Mammy." Jolson was nominated for an Oscar as Best Actor.

7. Adapted from the novel *The Clansman*, the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed by D. W. Griffith, chronicled the antebellum period, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras in the United States. Griffith tells a story of the South gone amiss during Reconstruction, with blacks taking over and terrorizing whites. The Ku Klux Klan emerges as a reaction and saves the South. Hence, the Confederacy finally finds redemption in victory after losing the Civil War. The movie was rife with stereotypes of African Americans as violent, stupid, cunning, and so on. *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed blacks as undeserving of freedom and rights. Civil rights organizations were outdone. The movie was extremely successful but fueled a great deal of racial tension and animosity.

8. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 14–15.

9. *Ibid.*, 62–63.

10. Endearing, that is, for those whites holding the belief that African American women were best suited for domestic work.

11. *Imitation of Life*. Dir. John M. Stahl. Perfs. Claudette Colbert, Louise Beavers. Universal Pictures, 1934.

12. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 57.

13. See Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 1998.

14. *Ibid.*, 82.

15. See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books and William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984).

16. See Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 1988.

17. *Ibid.*, 31, 33.

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18. See Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 1988.

19. The “one-drop” rule in U.S. history stated that anyone possessing even a small amount of African ancestry was classified as nonwhite. This was part of a rigid classification of race within the United States as Europeans came into contact with non-Europeans in the “new world.” The classification was also a way to resist miscegenation and therefore the concern of white supremacists with regard to maintaining a pure white race.

20. See Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 53.

21. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 152. Although I would argue that *Band of Angels* (1957) was equally effective in the strategy of casting a white actress to play the tragic mulatta leading lady. Unlike Pinky, *Band of Angels* was set during the antebellum period.

22. Until Delilah dies, leaving Peola remorseful and heartbroken over her mother’s death.

23. At least the audience never sees this within the context of the film, as the film ends with Delilah’s grand funeral in Harlem.

24. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 60.

25. See Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 1998.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 171.

29. See Anderson, *Mammies No More*, 53.

30. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 127.

31. “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” authored by the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Policy and Planning Research.

32. Sharecropping was a post-Emancipation debt–peonage system whereby a landowner allowed blacks to use the land in return for a share of the crop produced on the land. This practice originated during Reconstruction and continued well into the twentieth century (until the late 1960s). Blacks were constantly cheated, and they ended up in debt to the landowner. Sharecropping is often referred to as “slavery under freedom,” for it prevented blacks from getting ahead financially.

33. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 250.

34. Diana Ross was nominated as well for her dramatic role in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Liza Minnelli beat them both, winning for her role in *Cabaret*.

35. Blaxploitation was a film genre that emerged in the early 1970s in the United States. Targeted to an African American audience, exploitation movies were made about pimps, drug pushers, black female action heroines, and so on.

36. Like “B” movies, “B” movie studios were defined as second-rate, or second-tier, vis-à-vis major Hollywood studios such as Warner Brothers.

37. See Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company Publishers, Inc., 2006).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Sims notes that some African American leaders were very vocal in their criticism of Pam Grier for playing a character that they believed was demeaning of African Americans. Critics included Junius Griffin, the 1970s-era president of the Beverly Hills chapter of the NAACP, Jesse Jackson, and Roy Innis.

41. Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) is a federal welfare assistance program that is administered by the state or county; it provides supplemental aid to households that include one or more children under the age of eighteen.

42. For example, in menial positions such as domestic work or in the fast food industry.

43. Working at a job for wages is against welfare rules, even if the salary for that job is at or below minimum wage.

44. See Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and The Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 323–363.

45. Her husband, played by Sean "Diddy" Combs, is on death row in the film.

46. For example, as was true in real-life situations, the caseworker in the film made unexpected visits to Claudine's home, apparently expecting to find violations.

47. From the motion picture soundtrack *Claudine* (Capitol Records, 1999).

48. Consider the following true story relayed to the author: When a black female professor, well known for her research on the welfare system, was asked to consult on a welfare program in a predominantly white community in southwestern Virginia, the stereotype of the black woman as the typical welfare recipient came to bear. The organization was perplexed because although poor women living in the community were receiving government assistance, none were taking advantage of the assistance or programs for poor single mothers offered by the organization. When the professor looked at the images in the literature (e.g., brochures, pamphlets) that the organization disseminated throughout the community, she immediately discovered the problem. All of the photos of women in the literature were black, therefore, most likely, leading white women residing in the community to assume that the services were for black women only.

49. More recent films include *Boyz n the Hood* (Columbia Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1991) and *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Miramax, 1996).

50. See Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 1988.

51. Ibid., 101–102

52. See Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 1988.

53. Ibid.

54. Anderson, *Mammies No More*, 101–102.

55. See Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

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## Urban Cinema

*Paula J. Massood*

African American urban cinema, like cinema more generally, is a product of two related historical developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: industrialization and migration. In the earliest projected images, such as Auguste and Louis Lumiere's *The Arrival of a Train in Ciotat Station* (*L'Arrivee d'un train en gare de la Ciotat*, 1896), we see the convergence of industrial products: first in the spectacle of a train entering the station, second in the projected (via electricity) images of the train entering an urban setting, and third in the theatrical situation of the screening itself—the images were initially screened for audiences in Paris's Grand Café before touring international capitals such as New York and London.

In the United States, a similar convergence was underway as inventor and businessman Thomas Alva Edison developed his own version of moving-picture technology. Like the Lumiere brothers, whose primary business interest was photographic plates, Edison initially viewed film as a subsidiary product of his more immediate business concerns, which included electricity, telegraphs, and phonographs. Unlike his French counterparts, who initially found their subjects in the urban streets and back gardens of Lyons and Paris, Edison looked to another late-nineteenth-century phenomenon, the sideshow, to provide content for his short films. The popularity of the sideshow and carnival attraction, although not necessarily an urban phenomenon, indicated the increased leisure time brought about by industrialization—particularly in growing urban industrial areas. The 1893 Chicago World's Fair suggested, with its exhibits devoted to the gin mill, conveyor belt, and steam plant (which generated the site's electricity), that the nation was entering a new era of entertainment fueled by industrialization.<sup>1</sup>

Sideshows, carnivals, and vaudeville (a common exhibition venue for early film) didn't just enable film exhibition; they also provided Edison and other American film companies, such as the American Mutoscope

Company (later the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company), with rich subject matter. Featuring performers such as Sandow the Strongman, Annie Oakley, and the characters of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show (also present at the World Fair in 1893), for example, Edison's early short films used carnivalesque subjects for broad-based appeal.

African American performers were present in these early films as well, and as in the aforementioned attractions, early black cinematic performance codes were drawn from vaudeville and minstrelsy, as evidenced by titles such as *Watermelon Contest* (Edison, 1896), *Dancing Darkies* (Biograph, 1896), *Watermelon Feast* (Biograph, 1896), and *Who Said Watermelon?* (Selig, 1900; Lubin, 1902). In such shorts, African American characters often functioned as a sideshow attraction for curious audiences, with the humor geared toward demeaning depictions drawn from a cross section of popular culture (minstrelsy, newspapers, magazines, cartoons, music, and so on).<sup>2</sup>

As narratives lengthened over the next decade, such depictions developed into more complex stories featuring watermelon eating, cake walking, and chicken stealing. Because they were drawn from minstrel and vaudeville narratives, many of these early films were set on plantations or other rural settings, with adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) providing the model for an adaptable plantation melodrama (the novel appeared in serial form before being adapted, in whole or in part, for the vaudeville stage—and later, the screen).<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, African American characters in early short films were played by black performers. With the development of narrative and the increase in black roles (in comedies especially), this precedent changed. By around 1903, white performers were appearing in blackface.<sup>4</sup> This legacy of blackface performance and plantation settings developed over time, culminating most notoriously in D. W. Griffith's infamous *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), an adaptation of Thomas Dixon's plantation novels, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansmen* (1905). For decades to come, African Americans were found on cinematic plantations in what Ed Guerrero has called the "plantation genre."<sup>5</sup>

It was not merely the confluence of industrial factors, such as electricity, that led to the popularity of motion pictures in the United States. The growth of American industrial centers resulted in a demand for workers to man the nation's expanding manufacturing base, the majority of which was located in Northern urban areas. Much of this need was met by European immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but there was also a steady stream of African American migrants to Northern industrial areas.

This migration started even before the turn of the century, but it increased dramatically in the first two decades of the twentieth century. A

number of factors spurred this trend, including the increase in racially motivated violence (such as lynching) coupled with the continuing poverty linked to the sharecropping and peonage systems of Southern agrarian areas. Many southern black workers viewed the North as an escape route from poverty; Northern factories, especially in the years leading up to World War I (when the number of European immigrants dwindled), courted southern blacks in the pages of newspapers and magazines such as the *Defender*, the *Crisis*, and the *New York Age*. To new migrants, Northern cities promised a social, political, and economic change from southern economic and social disparities.

A side effect of industrial, urban life was that workers, even though they toiled in backbreaking jobs, enjoyed a much greater amount of leisure time than ever before. Film, with its relatively cheap admission (often as part of variety shows in local theaters) became a popular entertainment choice for workers of all races and ethnicities. As Jacqueline Najuma Stewart argues, increased leisure time was both the appeal and the shock of the city for recently arrived southerners to Chicago's South Side. For migrants more accustomed to the daily rhythms and patterns of the agrarian south, "Urban experiences such as industrial labor, streetcar travel, and entertainments like the cinema reshaped the im/migrant's sense of time and space."<sup>6</sup> In particular, black migrants to the city (Chicago, Harlem, Detroit) "frequently cited increases in leisure time and disposable income and the wider choice of recreational activities as major improvements in their daily lives."<sup>7</sup> Compared to the constant labor of sharecropping or peonage, urban life brought relatively higher wages and free time—often spent on amusements such as nickelodeons, vaudeville shows, amusement parks, and (after a short time) cinema. African American city folk enjoyed the movies, and yet the films they most often watched were neither made by black personnel nor centered upon black life in the city.

At roughly the same time that African American migrants were heading North, the film industry, which had been located primarily in New York and New Jersey, was heading west. By the late 1920s, Hollywood studios had developed an industry standard—a set of rules and conventions geared toward an economic and practical means of storytelling (mirroring the very same assembly-line approach to labor utilized by the nation's manufacturing base).

Despite being shut out of the industry, African American filmmakers were producing films as early as 1913, when the Chicago-based Foster Photoplay Company released its short comedy *The Railroad Porter*.<sup>8</sup> William Foster, a showman from the vaudeville circuit, built upon his theatrical experience to make films geared toward the entertainment of black audiences. Foster's involvement in film was part business venture, but also part necessity, as most films, as noted above, contained demeaning depictions

of African Americans. Furthermore, nickelodeons and theaters were often segregated venues even in more established black neighborhoods, such as Chicago's South Side or Harlem—both of which, by this point, had sizable black populations. Also, African Americans were excluded from all aspects of the movie business, because only a few companies controlled early production, and the cost of filmmaking technology was prohibitive. Theater ownership was equally difficult. As a result, independent film companies began to be established in the mid-to-late teens, making “race films” for African American audiences.

Though Foster was interested in the profit potential of the movie business, most early race-film companies stressed the educational, or uplifting, capacity of film.<sup>9</sup> Like many progressives at the time, the urban black bourgeoisie (W. E. B. Du Bois's “*Talented Tenth*”) attempted to lead newcomers away from urban temptations, such as drinking, gambling, and sex. To this end, black churches and other social institutions, along with the black press, “organized campaigns to instruct newcomers in the norms and values of respectability, encouraging cleanliness, sobriety, and restrained behavior in public places,” as Mary Carbine demonstrates.<sup>10</sup> Despite these attempts, many newly arrived migrants and other working-class blacks “chose ‘enthusiastic worship’ and a ‘lively nightlife’ as respite from tedious, physically draining occupations.”<sup>11</sup> Movies and movie houses were scorned as places of moral decline (and unacceptably boisterous behavior). But, film itself was seen as providing a panacea; by offering alternatives to the demeaning images produced by white production companies (and subsequently, Hollywood), and by providing models of middle class striving and success; for example, Lester Walton of the *New York Age* argued in 1920 that the “screen is not only functioning as a great entertainment, but is great education as well.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the two best-known African American film companies in the late teens and early twenties were the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, established by George and Noble Johnson, and the Micheaux Book and Film Company, founded by Oscar Micheaux. Of the two companies, Lincoln (based in Omaha, Nebraska) is most closely associated with uplift narratives. Lincoln produced a number of films focusing on various aspects of African American striving and success: *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916), *A Trooper of Troop K* (1917), *The Law of Nature* (1917), *A Man's Duty* (1919), and *By Right of Birth* (1921). Micheaux, a former railroad porter, homesteader, and novelist, was considered more of a showman and provocateur than a member of established black middle class.<sup>13</sup> His early films, such as *The Homesteader* (1919), an adaptation of his novel of the same name; *Within Our Gates* (1920); *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920); and *Body and Soul* (1925) included controversial subject matter, such as black urban criminality, the complicity of the black church in racial discrimination, and miscegenation; the films were therefore often criticized by both the black

and white press. And yet throughout his long career (lasting until his death in 1951), Micheaux remained concerned with the issues central to an African American population in transition: migration and settlement. The profit potential of the cinema made filmmaking an attractive pursuit for a man who, like Foster, welcomed such an opportunity to further his political and social agenda.

Although none of the silent-era race films can be considered urban cinema, they provide insight into the concerns and experiences of a rapidly urbanizing, and modernizing, African American population. Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, for example, addresses many of the issues of concern to the black urban bourgeoisie in a narrative that moves between the urban North and the rural South. The film focuses on an educated young woman, Sylvia Landry, who, through a variety of narrative twists, leaves her Northern home and takes a position teaching at Piney Woods, an all-black school in the South. When the school runs short of funds, Sylvia heads north again to Boston in search of a possible patron, whom she eventually finds. She returns to the school, but not before meeting and falling in love with a young physician, who had previously saved her from an attempted mugging. Near the end of the film, a flashback reveals that Sylvia is originally from the South and is the product of a (perhaps legitimately married) mixed-race couple. We also learn that her adoptive black family was the victim of a lynching (brought about, in part, because Sylvia's education enables her to identify the ways in which her sharecropper father is being cheated by the white plantation owner).

Besides its powerful rejoinder to many of the inflammatory themes raised by Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (including miscegenation, rape, and lynching), *Within Our Gates* is ultimately an uplift narrative detailing the black bourgeoisie's place in the new century. (In this way, the film is in keeping with "New Negro" discourses prevalent in the black community since the turn of the century.) The film's city scenes, in particular, provide examples of an established black middle class consisting of educated professionals and property owners; this is where we are first introduced to Sylvia; her first fiancé, Conrad (an engineer); Alma, the friend who owns the house in which Sylvia boards; and Dr. Vivian, Sylvia's future husband. But the city is also the location of black criminality, as exemplified by Larry Pritchard, Alma's cousin, who makes sexual advances toward Sylvia and later tries to extort money from her when she returns to Piney Woods. Also, Sylvia becomes the victim of an attempted robbery while walking the streets of the city. Such contractions between urban good and evil are consistent with middle-class narratives of the city: it is concurrently the location of uplift and moral decay.<sup>14</sup>

The film's initial reception illustrates the volatility of this particular moment in national history and the ways in which film would become a

powerful—and feared—tool in urban race politics. *Within Our Gates*'s narrative was especially controversial in Chicago, which had experienced a wave of riots in its predominantly black South Side neighborhoods the previous summer. This violence had been initiated when a young black man was stoned to death for swimming on the wrong (that is, white) side of a city beach. After the murder, the police were unresponsive to the black community's cries for justice. Race relations had already been strained, as the city's burgeoning black population was moving beyond the borders of the overcrowded South Side; the new migrants were seen by the white working class as unwelcome competitors for jobs and housing. Black Chicago had erupted at news of the murder, and the subsequent violence resulted in thirty-eight deaths and hundreds of injuries.

In both Chicago's black and white communities, it was feared that Micheaux's film—which, according to Jane Gaines, was "rhetorically organized to encourage the feeling of righteous indignation in the Black spectator"—would incite a new wave of riots.<sup>15</sup> Social and religious leaders protested the film and called for the cutting of its more offensive scenes of lynching and attempted rape; the director had no choice but to comply. Micheaux's experiences in Chicago were replicated in other cities with large black communities, and were testament to the powerful effect that filmed violence had on community leaders. Their fear of the film's effects also indicates both the black and white urbanites' struggle with the economic and social effects of migration.

Although silent-era race films dealt indirectly with the effects of urbanization and modernization, it was not until the thirties, during the early sound era, that race-film companies began producing films that could more accurately be called urban cinema—and this only occurred after change had come to the film industry as a whole. With the release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, Hollywood's transition to sound technologies signaled a significant change in American film practices, yet certain narrative conventions continued. When Al Jolson, in blackface, performed the first few spoken words in a feature-length American film, he helped to transfer the nation's ingrained and almost naturalized minstrel aesthetic from silent to sound film (and return minstrelsy to its musical roots). Moreover, the film's exploration of the tensions between old and new, tradition and modernity, and spiritual and popular music suggest larger themes and tensions already evident in modernist aesthetics from the era—African American aesthetics in particular. What changed was that Hollywood, despite its blackface stars, began to include African American performers in more significant roles in feature films. The new sound technology, it seemed, was well suited for black voices.<sup>16</sup>

One of the first genres to include the sounds and sights of black urban life comprised a group of Hollywood musicals featuring all-black casts

Al Jolson in Alan Crosland's 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*.



Warner Bros. Pictures/Photofest

made between 1929 and 1943: *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), *Hallelujah* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), and *Stormy Weather* (1943). Ironically most of these films continued in the plantation tradition first seen in nineteenth-century literature, the vaudeville stage, and early film, with narratives located in rural settings (this was no accident, since many black-cast musicals were adaptations of stage plays). Such locations—in *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah*, for example—not only facilitated the performance of spirituals in the films, which was one of their main draws, but also suggested that the nation's African American population consisted primarily of sharecroppers and unsophisticated folk. This depiction provided a continuation of earlier minstrelsy and a refutation of the growing urbanization of black life (or, alternately, the growing African Americanization of city life).<sup>17</sup>

But to suggest that the films were nothing more than negative stereotypes of rural black life is to overlook the complex ways in which their narratives exhibited the tensions between the country and the city—tensions felt throughout a rapidly expanding nation. For example, in *The Green Pastures* (a musical adaptation of Mark Connelly's Pulitzer prize-winning play), religious piety is often set against so-called urban pleasures such as jazz, dance, and sex, and spirituals are intertwined with more contemporary performance modes.<sup>18</sup> This complexity is even more evident in Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky*, which James Naremore has described as Minnelli's response to the "racial dialogue of the day," and which David

Ethel Waters (as Petunia Jackson), Eddie “Rochester” Anderson (as Joseph “Little Joe” Jackson), John W. Sublett, aka John Bubbles (as Domino Johnson), and Lena Horne (as Georgia Brown) in Vincente Minnelli’s 1943 film *Cabin in the Sky*.



MGM/Photofest

A. Gerstner suggests is an “idiosyncratic product” of white, queer, and New Negro modernisms.<sup>19</sup>

Minnelli’s film debut follows many of the conventions of other black-cast musicals of the time: its story focuses on the tensions between heaven and hell (or a moral, good life versus one of debauchery and sin) as embodied in the characters of Petunia (Ethel Waters), Little Joe (Eddie “Rochester” Anderson), and Georgia Brown (Lena Horne). Little Joe is caught between his love for Petunia, his pious and hardworking wife, and Georgia, a tantalizing seductress he meets in the suggestively named Club Paradise. The narrative contains reversals (Joe is bad, then good, then bad, then good again) and dream sequences, but the story is fairly conventional and straightforward. Most of the action takes place in the rural cabin of the title, with characters occasionally moving into locations that aid in their characterization; for example, Petunia is seen in church, and Little Joe shifts between the church, home, and the club, depending on his resolutions and temptations.

Despite this, and perhaps because of Minnelli’s past as a set designer in New York, urban aesthetics fully inform the film. This is most obvious in the



character of Georgia Brown, along with that of Lucifer Jr. and his idea men (including performances by Rex Ingram, Mantan Moreland, Willie Best, and others from the stage and vaudeville circuit), and in the overall stylization of the club's mise-en-scène (including the costumes of the club's patrons). On the most basic level the film's urban components (often signifying sex, gambling, and other vices) function as cautionary elements in a tale that, on its surface, is about leading a good life. In this way, the city occupies a similar role as in many uplift melodramas: as a place filled with temptation.

Yet many of the film's pleasures reference highly recognizable black urban aesthetics; for example, Minnelli drew upon his New York friendships and acquaintances with performers and entertainers, such as Horne and Waters, who were better known (at this time) for their cabaret and club performances. Other performers, such as Ingram and Oscar Polk, enjoyed stage as well as screen careers and brought, along with Minnelli, a Broadway cache to the film. Finally, the film's choreography was based upon the original Broadway show, which was staged by Katherine Dunham and George Balanchine (the latter of whom was close friends with the film's composer, Vernon Duke).<sup>20</sup> Although the overall effect of this combination of diegetic (narrative, setting) and nondiegetic (performers, original source) factors may have been to suggest the preferability of Petunia and Little Joe's idyllic cabin (for *Cabin in the Sky* ends with the couple living happily ever after), there can be no denying that urban, modernist aesthetics (both black and white) are responsible for the film's appeal. Furthermore, in *Cabin in the Sky*, we begin to see Hollywood's acknowledgment of an increasingly urbanized, contemporary African American presence (a presence that grew even more rapidly in the years surrounding World War II).<sup>21</sup>

The transition to sound had a different effect on the race-film industry. Many black-owned companies (like many black-owned theaters) were already undercapitalized and lacking the financial resources to adapt to expensive sound technology. The stock-market crash of 1929 and the nation's subsequent economic depression further crippled independent production companies, although Hollywood weathered the downturn. These hardships put black-owned production companies at an even greater disadvantage, along with the fact that many popular African American performers (such as Waters, Horne, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and others) were drawn to Hollywood's increased pay and better sound and image quality. (Even the more prominent race-film companies, including Micheaux's Film Company, were underfinanced operations that could not compete with the more polished Hollywood products.)

African American audiences, likewise, were drawn to the production values of Hollywood films. The casting of African American performers in featured roles (at least in the musicals) was an added bonus for these viewers. By the

early thirties, therefore, most black-owned companies, with the exception of Oscar Micheaux, had gone out of business—and even Micheaux was forced to take money from white investors.

During the early sound era, the race film experienced a transformation that would ultimately result in what can be identified as urban cinema, an indirect result of producers' attempts to maintain economic and aesthetic viability. The outlay required by sound technology necessitated an increase in investment, and a number of mixed-race companies (whites behind the camera, African Americans in front) were established in the thirties to continue making films for black audiences (though some black-owned companies continued making films). On the East Coast, for example, producer Jack Goldberg set up a number of Harlem-based companies from the late twenties through the forties and produced such films as *Harlem is Heaven* (Lincoln Productions, 1932) and *Paradise in Harlem* (Jubilee Pictures, 1940), both of which capitalized on the mythical appeal of Harlem cabarets by featuring African American performers in song-and-dance numbers.

Many production companies were also established around Hollywood, in the Los Angeles area. One of the better known of the companies was Million Dollar Productions, founded in 1937 by brothers Harry M. and Leo Popkin, renowned for its series of gangster films starring Ralph Cooper. Its first film, *The Duke Is Tops* (1938), provided Lena Horne with her first starring role opposite Cooper (rereleased as *The Bronze Venus* after Horne's success with *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*). Other notable West Coast companies include Associated Features (est. 1937) and Hollywood Productions (est. 1938), both of which were involved in the production of a series of Westerns featuring cabaret singer Herb Jeffries as a singing cowboy.

Unlike silent-era race-film productions (whether from black or mixed-race companies), which tended to focus on uplift narratives, sound-era race films often conformed to the conventions of (by then) highly recognizable Hollywood genres, including sports (boxing) films, gangster films, and Westerns. No matter the genre, however, the films often featured song-and-dance numbers in an attempt to compete with Hollywood films—particularly the all-black musicals and highly popular soundies (short musical films made between 1940 and 1946 and shown on jukeboxes) featuring African American performers. One of the most popular genres of race films during this time was the gangster film; films such as *Dark Manhattan* (Harry L. Fraser, 1937, Million Dollar Productions), *Underworld* (Oscar Micheaux, 1937, Micheaux Film Corporation), *Moon Over Harlem* (Edgar Ulmer, 1939, Meteor Studios), *Paradise in Harlem* (Joseph Seiden, 1940, Jubilee Pictures), and *Gang War* (Leo C. Popkin, 1940, Million Dollar Pictures) introduced the conventions used in later African American films set in the city, including blaxploitation films of the seventies and the ghetto action (or hood) films of the nineties.

Many of these films, especially those conforming to mainstream generic conventions, have been dismissed as nothing more than black versions of Hollywood films . . . and yet the early black gangster films show evidence of adaptations by race-film producers to address the specific experiences of their African American, urban audiences. On the one hand, films such as *Dark Manhattan* conform to many of the codes first introduced in early gangster films, such as *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931), *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932). They are urban-based crime dramas focusing on a romanticized, though violent, criminal hero trying to succeed via the only path open to an uneducated (often immigrant) underclass: alternative economies such as smuggling, racketeering, numbers running, and bootlegging.<sup>22</sup> The Hollywood gangster hero's appeal hinged on his status as an outsider without access to the American dream (due to ethnicity, lack of education, or lack of social connections). During the thirties, the genre provided working-class audiences with an alternative narrative about success, along with a distraction from the economic constraints of the Depression. Its focus on the urban underworld also appealed to a nation with burgeoning cities.

Although many of the black gangster films identified above provide case studies of the role of the city in African American film from the time, *Dark Manhattan* embodies the ways in which race-film companies, and African American entertainers, desired to see places such as Harlem depicted on screen—if not actually, then at least mythically. The film was the brainchild of Ralph Cooper, its star, and his producing partner George Randol (also the screenwriter). Cooper was an entertainer most known for his work as an actor and as the emcee of the Apollo Theater's Amateur Night. In the mid-thirties, he moved to Hollywood, and was initially contracted to appear opposite Shirley Temple in a number of films produced by 20th Century Fox. When this fell through (he was considered too alluring to star opposite the child), Cooper tried to interest the studios into making all-black films. Receiving no response, he joined with Randol to produce his own films. Randol was a veteran stage performer, having appeared on Broadway, for example, in both the original production and the revival of Connelly's *The Green Pastures*. The result of the partnership was *Dark Manhattan*, which Million Dollar Productions helped finance once Cooper and Randol ran out of funds. Like *Cabin in the Sky*, *Dark Manhattan* had urban cache even before it was made.

According to Henry T. Sampson, Million Dollar Productions produced some of the "most stylish black films" of the day (between 1937 and 1940).<sup>23</sup> Although *Dark Manhattan* may not be as polished as *The Duke Is Tops* (a later Million Dollar production), it was, according to its own press releases, "the first all-colored cast motion picture with modern story, setting and

costumes,”<sup>24</sup> a distinct break from the majority of Hollywood’s depictions of rural black life. It was also, in its focus on a named—and therefore recognizable—black urban space, a break from silent-era race films. The film’s modern story, setting, costumes, and urban slang conform to many of the conventions of the gangster film. The narrative, for example, focuses on the story of Curly Thorpe, an underling for L. B. Lee—a numbers kingpin who, aside from his illegal activities, is a model businessman. Curly is from the wrong side of the tracks (the “jungle,” or downtown Manhattan), and his desire to climb the ladder to success, like that of many gangsters, is stymied by greed and hubris. His downfall comes when he reaches for too much: Lee’s business and his girlfriend.

Even though Curly’s story adheres to the fates of many Hollywood gangsters (Paul Muni in *Scarface*, for example), *Dark Manhattan* is a significant break from the white gangster narrative. As mentioned above, figures such as Cooper and Randol brought an urban, East Coast sophistication to the project. This, coupled with the characters’ contemporary costuming, use of slang (not dialect), and their frequenting of cabarets (featuring song-and-dance numbers), provided an immediacy lacking in many films from the time. The film’s Harlem (uptown Manhattan) setting is presented as a polyglot space that’s full of promise (if, of course, residents make the correct decisions): gangsters mingle with businessmen in the city’s streets and offices, and everyday folk mix with entertainers and other luminaries in the city’s cabarets. Moreover, the film’s title, like those of many of the black gangster films from this time (*Paradise in Harlem* and *Moon Over Harlem*, for example), calls out a specific place, “Harlem,” and relies on such signifying to convey meaning to audiences. In this the film acknowledges the enabling presence of Harlem: in its personnel, its narrative, its performance modes, its setting . . . and finally, in its audiences.

Elsewhere I have discussed the importance of the city in sound-era race films (both gangster films and Westerns).<sup>25</sup> In many ways, Harlem, whether represented in actual streets or in legend (and, by the late thirties, it had become a legend), functioned as a motif for increasingly urbanized and sophisticated African American audiences. The films “addressed their audiences in the present tense,”<sup>26</sup> thus acknowledging their transformation from rural farmers to industrial workers (many of whom were based in urban areas). The gangster films in particular established the codes of an African American urban cinema: recognizable city spaces, contemporary clothing, urban slang, references to popular culture (particularly music and dance), and an overall immediacy (through a combination of the above, and later, the addition of location shooting)—that continue to this day, albeit in somewhat revised form.

Although race-film companies continued producing films into the forties, by the end of the decade, they had all but disappeared (or moved onto other

subject matter), with Oscar Micheaux the sole surviving independent black filmmaker until his death in 1951 (his last film, *The Betrayal*, appeared in 1948). As with its establishment decades before, the demise of the race-film industry was brought about by larger political and industrial circumstances (already foreshadowed by the effects of sound technologies and black-cast musicals). In 1941 the United States entered World War II. African American soldiers enlisted and fought for freedom abroad—in segregated military units (the military would not be desegregated until 1948). Following the war, returning soldiers faced similar discrimination as before they left. African American political and social leaders protested for more equality among the races, citing the hypocrisy of asking black soldiers to fight abroad while receiving unequal treatment upon return. At the same time (1942), the Hollywood chapter of the NAACP challenged the film industry to change its depictions of black characters on the screen. The immediate result of these efforts were films such as *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*.

Following the war, however, the industry began acknowledging racial and social injustice in a series of films referred to as “message movies” or “problem pictures”—low-budget movies focusing on racism, anti-Semitism, and drug abuse. Message movies allowed Hollywood to shift out of the segregation of black-cast musicals and into a low-cost, low-risk group of films that focused, in this context, on American racism and African American achievement. Typical titles include *Home of the Brave* (Mark Robson, 1949) and *No Way Out* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950)—the former a story of a black soldier (James Edwards) in an all-white military unit and the latter marking Sidney Poitier’s film debut as an African American doctor facing white bigotry. Message movies, the industry’s response to the early Civil Rights movement, projected an integrated (though neither urban nor black) world for mixed audiences. With the move toward integration, the need for a separate cinema seemed to disappear.

African American urban cinema did not reappear until the late sixties. By this point, a number of factors had changed the political and social environment in the United States. With the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 (ruling segregation unconstitutional) and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the nation seemed poised to enter a new era in race relations. But the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, along with that of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, halted whatever legal and legislative gains had been made. The situation in the nation’s major cities—Los Angeles and New York, for example—was already tense as urban areas felt the intertwined effects of white flight to the suburbs, the loss of manufacturing jobs, increased poverty, and an overall sense of governmental abandonment.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, by the end of the decade, urban African Americans had survived a wave of rebellions in places such as the Watts section of Los

Angeles in 1965, and in Newark and Detroit in 1967. The result of such civic devastation extended beyond the immediate loss of lives and property: jobs were lost, and the inner city became a ghetto. African American politics, spurred on by a growing sense of dismay at more traditional Civil Rights strategies, assumed a more active political stance, perhaps best symbolized by the rise of the Black Panthers and other nationalist groups.

At the same time that African American politics were transforming, the arts were also in a state of flux. After witnessing the more integrationist, bourgeois aesthetics of such artists as the Harlem Renaissance poets, painters, and sculptors, young African American artists began establishing a Black Arts movement informed by Black Nationalist and Pan African politics. Because of its prohibitive costs, African American cinema was slower to emerge, but by the late sixties, black filmmakers began defining their own set of aesthetics.

These filmmakers could be divided into two camps: those connected to Hollywood and those who broke with Hollywood conventions in an attempt to define an authentic black cinematic voice. The former group consisted of filmmakers associated with the blaxploitation genre; the latter was associated with (though not limited to) student filmmakers at UCLA. In either case, one of the main goals at this time was to capture the sights and sounds of contemporary African American urban life—and the filmmaker credited with starting it all is Melvin Van Peebles.

Van Peebles came to Hollywood at a time when the industry was in transition: an ongoing financial crisis had studio heads looking for younger (and cheaper) directors and toward new markets (including urban African American audiences); the NAACP was again pressuring the studios to increase the representation of African American personnel among its ranks; and the systems of rules and conventions that had proscribed film content since the thirties, the Production Code, was replaced with the ratings system still in place (with slight changes) today. American filmmakers and audiences were increasingly exposed to and influenced by the style and form of international film, particularly the French New Wave and the Italian and Japanese cinemas. The result was that during the late sixties and the early seventies, Hollywood produced cheaper films that, in look and sound, dealt more directly and self-consciously with the contemporary context. With the code gone, American film also included more explicit violence, crime, and sexual content.<sup>28</sup>

After a short career in Hollywood, where he made *Watermelon Man* (1970) for Columbia Pictures, Van Peebles chose to work independently, modeling himself after another African American film entrepreneur, Oscar Micheaux.<sup>29</sup> The result was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, a film he wrote, directed, edited, and scored. The film, the story of a young outlaw/trickster

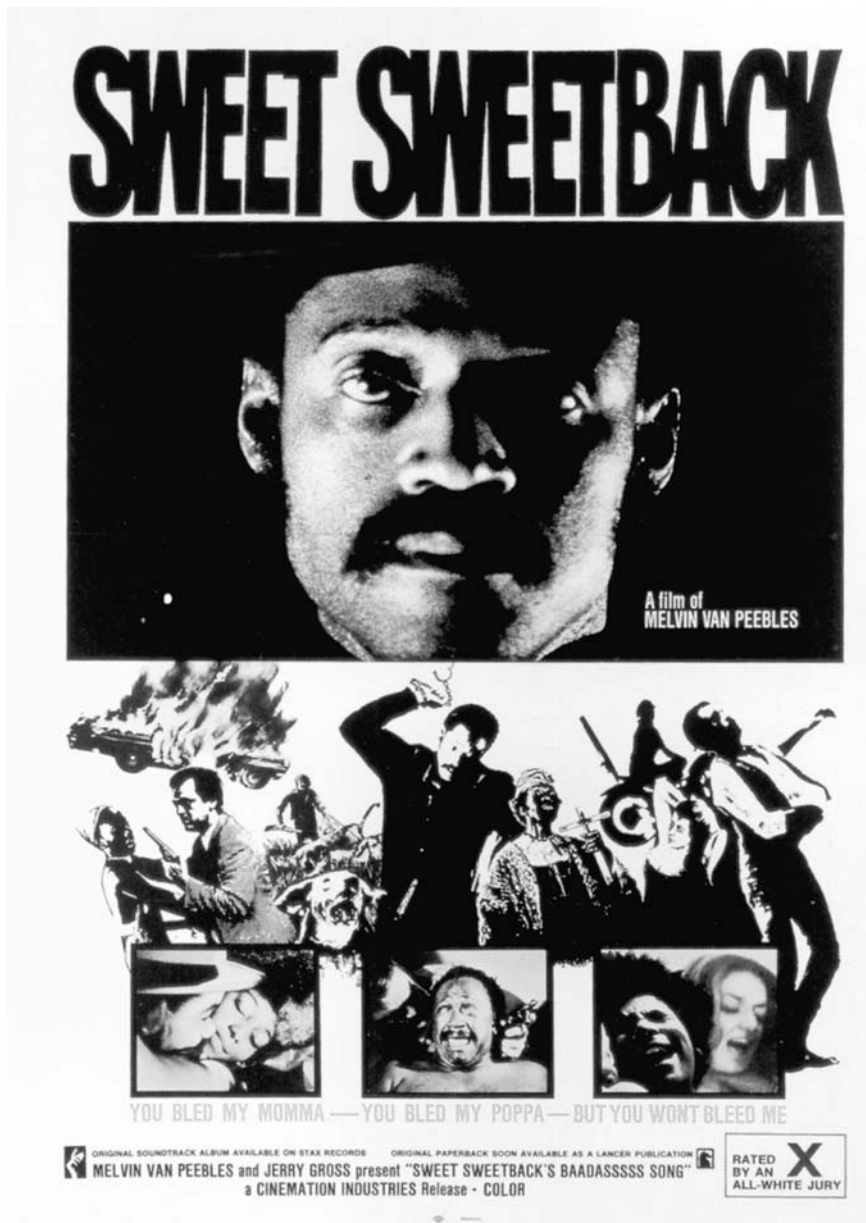
figure on the run from the LAPD, has a now legendary production history: Van Peebles financed the film through a variety of sources, including his own money (made with *Watermelon Man*) and some finishing funds from Bill Cosby. He kept production costs low by passing the production off as a pornographic film (thus avoiding union rates), scoring the film himself, and relying on friends and family members for casting and technical support. In all, he completed the film in three weeks for under a half million dollars.<sup>30</sup> The film initially received an “X” rating (limiting its theatrical run), but it went on to make \$10 million in its first year, the result of a number of related interlocking and timely factors.

*Sweetback* was a film for the political, social, and aesthetic moment. The film’s eponymous character works at a brothel in Los Angeles. One day the LAPD needs a stand-in for a police lineup, and Sweetback’s boss volunteers his employee. On the way to the precinct, the officers sidetrack to arrest another character, Moo Moo, a young revolutionary whom they beat for no particular reason. Sweetback intervenes, hitting the cops with their own handcuffs and setting off a chase that forms the film’s narrative structure. During the course of the film, Sweetback runs from the cops, hides out with a variety of supporters in the city, gets out of trouble through sex on a number of occasions, beats at least one more set of cops, and kills a few dogs before escaping across the border into Mexico.

The film’s style is experimental and rough (perhaps due to its low budget); its editing is choppy and includes a number of jump cuts and superimpositions; and its camerawork is often shaky, as if replicating newsreel footage from the time. Its soundtrack, scored by Van Peebles and performed by the then-unknown Earth, Wind, and Fire, often purposely works against the images, creating a cacophony that increases the tension of an already tense narrative.

To return to the film’s context is to understand *Sweetback*’s appeal. African American urban residents made up a large portion of the American film audience at the time, and they desired film narratives and characters that sympathized with their situation. Sweetback’s outsider status and his tangles with the law reflected the situation in a number of large urban areas. The film glorified the urban underworld and made the police part of the problem, rather than the solution. If we remember that many of the urban rebellions in the sixties were sparked by incidents of police brutality, we might understand Sweetback’s popularity: he fought back, thus providing an example of black male cinematic agency that replicated many of the political viewpoints of the Black Power movement. In fact, an entire issue of the Black Panther party’s newspaper was devoted to the film. In it Huey P. Newton called *Sweetback* “the first truly revolutionary Black film made.”<sup>31</sup> Others were less supportive, and critics such as *Ebony*’s Lerone Bennett criticized the film for glorifying inner city crime and violence.

Poster art for Melvin Van Peebles's 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.



*Cinematic Industries/Photofest*



Despite the critical maelstrom, *Sweetback* was a success, and its model of an urban underworld stuck. Hollywood, never inclined to support political causes, was drawn to the formula nonetheless; it offered a cheap way of making highly profitable films. Shortly after *Sweetback's* release, the studios began producing what has subsequently been called the blaxploitation genre: low-budget films geared to young black men that celebrate pimp-hustler heroes in an urban milieu. Most of the films were shot on location in cities with significant African American populations (New York, Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago), and most featured sights (costumes, streets, theaters, clubs) and sounds (music by Isaac Hayes, Curtis Mayfield, and others) made popular by *Sweetback*.

The first film released by the studios was *Shaft* (1971), produced by MGM and directed by Gordon Parks Sr. *Shaft*, like *Sweetback*, was a financial success, earning approximately \$11 million on an initial investment of \$1.2 million. This, and the success of Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* the following year, resulted in a flood of blaxploitation films—with at least forty-seven released between 1970 and 1973.<sup>32</sup> Initially, African American directors such as the Parkses were employed to make the films, but as the genre expanded, white filmmakers got involved, and what was originally an African American genre was appropriated by Hollywood.

*Sweetback* was also the inspiration for another group of African American films. During the late sixties and early seventies, young African American and African student filmmakers began working within the graduate film program at UCLA. Members of the “L.A. School” of filmmakers included Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, and Billy Woodbury, among others. Like Van Peebles, the LA School filmmakers were interested in developing a revolutionary form of cinema that broke with Hollywood conventions. They were inspired by a cross section of political and cinematic influences, including the black arts movements and the Black Panthers, the writings of Amílcar Cabral and Franz Fanon, the films of Oscar Micheaux (whom they saw as too middle class), the revolutionary new cinemas emerging at the time from places such as Cuba and Brazil, the French New Wave, and the British social documentary of the thirties. As this variety of influences suggests, their films were disparate in form; however, they were all bound by a common interest in focusing on “family, women, history, and folklore” within the urban setting of a post-rebellion Los Angeles.<sup>33</sup>

Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) is one of the best examples of an LA School film. Burnett's film focuses on a family living in Los Angeles. The father, Stan, works in a slaughterhouse in order to support his family. When he's not at work, Stan is increasingly distanced from his wife and two children as his daily drudgery makes it difficult for him to connect with those around him. The film was shot on location in Los Angeles, and it

switches among shots of sheep being butchered in the abattoir, Stan's modest home, and street scenes involving different characters.

The latter scenes often show children at play in the rail yards and abandoned lots of Los Angeles's south central neighborhoods. The location shooting in these scenes often captures the devastation (empty lots, boarded-up buildings) left behind in the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1965.<sup>34</sup> And yet there's no escape for the characters: Stan can't find a better job, nor does he have the economic means to take his family out of the city even for a day (he buys a motor that doesn't work, and then his friend's car has a flat on a family outing). Without resorting to the violence or the sexual content of *Sweetback* or a blaxploitation film, *Killer of Sheep* communicates a sense of a city that has been abandoned economically and spiritually.

Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* makes a similar point, but its focus on Dorothy, a single mother living on welfare, is much closer in spirit to *Sweetback*. Although Burnett's film is unconventional in form, mixing documentary-like footage with relatively straightforward narrative sequences, Gerima's film juxtaposes events in Dorothy's life, mixing past and present in order to provide a collage of her experiences, rather than a linear exposition of events.

The film's purpose is to highlight the myriad forms of state control (via the police, the welfare agency, and the employment office) over African American people in urban areas. It details Dorothy's attempts to find work and to support herself, her daughter, and her unborn child once her partner is sent to prison for a crime he didn't commit. Over the course of the film, Dorothy has interactions with the social services (who complete home inspections and attempt to coerce her into an abortion) and justice systems (through her partner's incarceration and her daughter's rape). While we see these events on the screen, the film's soundtrack illustrates the cacophony of Dorothy's life: social workers question, the radio plays, neighbors talk, and noise continually comes up from the street. The film suggests that life for the black urban underclass is characterized by power, state control, and limitations on social and economic mobility.

Although most of the filmmakers associated with the LA School continue to make films (mostly outside the industry), blaxploitation film and filmmakers, because of their relationship with the industry, experienced a different fate. The mixed, often volatile, response to Van Peebles's *Sweetback* suggests the ways in which blaxploitation films as a whole were received. The films, though celebrated by audiences for their constructions of black male power, were also criticized by many community leaders for their celebration of an urban underworld peopled by pimps, drug dealers, and prostitutes. The eventual disappearance of blaxploitation was in part due to pressure placed on the industry by African American political and religious groups. Financial considerations also played a big part in

Hollywood's shift away from blaxploitation; for example, Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* was released in 1975. The film's massive box-office success provided Hollywood with a new filmmaking formula, the blockbuster, in which the studios placed huge amounts of resources into big-budget films that brought in even greater returns. Films with African American lead characters and inner-city settings were not part of that formula. As a result, Hollywood released fewer blaxploitation films, wholly eliminating investment in the genre by the late seventies. African American filmmaking, especially African American urban cinema, disappeared from mainstream screens.<sup>35</sup>

This situation did not change until the next decade and the appearance of Spike Lee, who released his first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It*, in 1986. Like many young American directors at this time, Lee was a university-trained filmmaker who was familiar with a variety of international filmmaking styles and genres. He was also familiar with African American film history and modeled his approach to filmmaking entrepreneurship along the lines of Oscar Micheaux and Melvin Van Peebles. Like Lee's precursors' films, *She's Gotta Have It*, the story of a young Brooklyn woman and her three lovers, was made independently, on a miniscule budget cobbled together from a variety of private and public funds.<sup>36</sup> The film was a box-office success, earning approximately \$10 million in its first year of release. Its innovative style—incorporating black and white footage, direct address, montage sequences, and location shooting—suggested a new direction in American filmmaking, a break from the big-budget glossy films made by Hollywood. It also suggested a new direction for African American urban cinema—one that was not bound by the codes of the gangster film or blaxploitation. Instead, black neighborhoods and people were lovingly and beautifully rendered on screen. Moreover, *She's Gotta Have It* introduced black Brooklyn to national and international audiences.

Rather than focusing on the city's criminal underclass, *She's Gotta Have It* tells the story of Nola, a middle-class professional woman from Brooklyn. Nola's three lovers, Jamie, Mars, and Greer, suggest diverse models of African American masculinity, from Jamie's middle-class demeanor to Mars's homeboy fashion and slang. This latter character, played by the director himself, is an early precursor of a later staple of African American urban cinema: a young black male whose persona is drawn from the rhythms and rhymes of rap and hip-hop music. The film's connections to popular music (rap and hip-hop were still relatively unknown outside of urban circles at this time) not only map out the direction African American film would take over the next decade, but also link to a short-lived genre of films: rap/graffiti/break-dance films, made during the mid-eighties, examples of which include *Wild Style* (Charles Ahearn, 1983), *Beat Street* (Stan Lathan, 1984), and *Krush Groove* (Michael Schultz, 1985). These films introduced rap music and break dancing to mainstream, crossover audiences.

More important, they located their narratives in urban areas (in particular, the South Bronx and Brooklyn), suggesting a vibrant form of youth culture in previously demonized neighborhoods.<sup>37</sup>

Lee's first feature and the two that quickly followed—*School Daze* (1988) and *Do The Right Thing* (1989)—were responsible for sparking a renewed interest in African American film production; it is not an overstatement to credit the director, along with Robert Townsend and Warrington and Reginald Hudlin, with spearheading a new wave of contemporary black filmmaking over the subsequent years.<sup>38</sup> Lee's films, like those of Townsend and the Hudlins, brought to the screen a renewed interest in African American stories and African American history. They also self-consciously engaged in a dialogue with image making, drawing on contemporary and historical references to create films that focused on African American representation in film and television. *She's Gotta Have It*, for example, looks at sexual relations between black men and women in a middle-class Brooklyn setting. Lee's next film, *School Daze*, exposed intra-racial and class tensions between students on the campus of a fictional all-black college. And *Do the Right Thing*, perhaps Lee's most controversial film, focused on a Bed-Stuy block during one of the hottest days of the summer. This film, like many of the LA School films and Van Peebles's *Sweetback*, also references many of the pressures of African American urban life, including police brutality and economic disparity. What is most striking, despite differences in aesthetics and location (Los Angeles versus New York), is the continuing relevance of such themes in African American urban film.

With Lee's success in particular, the studios once again became attracted to the profit possibilities of African American urban cinema. Industry interest was also fueled by the increased popularity and visibility of rap and hip-hop music and the moneymaking potential of ancillary products such as soundtracks and DVDs.<sup>39</sup> There is no doubt that the group of urban films made by African American directors in the early nineties, variously referred to as hood or ghetto action films, were fueled by the narratives and images of hip-hop and gangsta rap in particular—a focus on the urban underclass, particularly young males, and a glorification of the criminal (“gangsta”) life.<sup>40</sup> As mentioned earlier, images such as these were already evident in Lee's films and the rap films from the eighties—and, loosely, in the blaxploitation films before them.

In the early nineties, conditions in African American urban areas were no better than they had been in the sixties and seventies, and in some cases, they were actually worse. With the devastating influence of Reaganomics and a loss of urban manufacturing, poverty and joblessness remained endemic to neighborhoods such as Los Angeles's South Central and Watts sections, portions of New York's Brooklyn (especially Bed-Stuy, Red Hook, and East New York), Detroit's inner city, and Chicago's South

Side. African American neighborhoods were also facing a new challenge: drugs (especially crack cocaine), which had taken on epidemic proportions by the mid-eighties. For a burgeoning youth population with no legal employment prospects, drug dealing and gang life were everyday realities.<sup>41</sup> Rap musicians (and music videos) were the first to outline this way of life; popular cinema followed suit.

As in blaxploitation, one of the hood film's precursors was an independent feature made by a first-time filmmaker. Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991) was made for approximately a half million dollars and, on the basis of a strong showing at the Sundance Film Festival, made \$2.7 million during its first twenty-two weeks in theaters after opening in May 1991. The film's narrative, about a young black man hoping to escape life in the crime-ridden housing projects of Redhook, Brooklyn, struck a chord with audiences, especially those who recognized its images and nihilistic themes from rap lyrics. Moreover, its gritty location shooting and low-budget aesthetic provided an immediacy and a sense of realism that resonated with audiences. In many ways, the film was thought to be a near documentary of actual life in the city.

By this point, the studios already had similar films in the works, most notably—*Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), which was released by Columbia Pictures in July 1991, two months after Rich's film. Singleton was a wunderkind director, fresh from USC, who was given a \$6 million budget to direct his first feature. The resulting film introduced many of the hood conventions that would be replicated by other films throughout the decade. The film's location shooting in a recognizable city space (via street signs and other verbal and visual markers), rap soundtrack (and casting of rapper Ice Cube), and focus on young black youth (particularly men) was meant to illustrate the pressures and constraints faced by many inner-city residents. Its coming-of-age story added a melodramatic element to the film, providing it with a mix of violence and pathos similar to the elements that made gangster narratives so popular in the thirties and onward.

The film touched upon many of the themes driving earlier African American urban cinema, particularly those of mobility and access to some version of the American dream. Its story of Tre, a young man trying to survive the streets of South Central (and its gangs and drugs) while making a better life for himself, links directly back to films such as *Dark Manhattan* and Curly Thorpe's attempts to escape his downtown roots. Unlike Curly (or later blaxploitation characters, such as Priest in *Superfly*), Tre avoids the criminal life (although maintaining a deep affiliation with his roots). Even so, he has to overcome numerous obstacles, including police brutality and black-on-black violence. The depiction of his struggles, along with the film's inclusion of gang-related violence, made *Boyz n the Hood* a tremendous success among black and white audiences (it earned \$57 million in its

Ice Cube (as Darin “Doughboy” Baker) in John Singleton’s 1991 film *Boyz N the Hood*.



Columbia Pictures Corp./Photofest

first seventeen weeks of release).<sup>42</sup> From this and the success of *Straight Out of Brooklyn* and *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), the hood film, like blaxploitation before it, became a Hollywood staple.<sup>43</sup>

Between 1991 and 1996, Hollywood released a number of films following a similar format. Some of the more notable titles include *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), *Poetic Justice* (Singleton, 1993), *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993), and *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996), a female variant on the genre. The codes and conventions of the hood became familiar so rapidly that it wasn't long before they were being parodied in films such as *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Paris Barclay, 1995) or used to add an element of ghetto authenticity to other genres; for example, Mario Van Peebles's *Posse* (1993) combines the elements of the Western with the hood film, placing the city on the frontier. At the same time, hood films, like blaxploitation films, began receiving criticism within the African American community for what many saw as one-dimensional representations of African American urban life. Filmmakers such as Spike Lee began to respond with their own, more critical, variations on the genre.

Perhaps the best example of this shift in the hood genre appears in Lee's *Clockers* (1995). The film follows many of the conventions of the hood film: it is set in the city (Brooklyn) and focuses on the coming of age experiences

of Strike, a young “clocker,” or small-time drug dealer. One of ways in which the film critiques the culture of authenticity promulgated by the aesthetics (gritty image, moving camera, location shooting) and marketing of hood films appears in its opening sequence: a series of actual crime scene photos of murdered young black men restaged for the camera.<sup>44</sup> After this opening sequence, the film’s deconstruction of gangsta mythology continues by suggesting that Strike’s choice to deal drugs is not without significant effects on his family, his community, and his own body (he struggles with ulcers, the result of the stress of his occupation). The film’s references to other aspects of gangsta culture—guns, conspicuous consumption, and the glorification of the outsider—also function as a critique of the genre and its appropriation by Hollywood and the music industry.

By the end of the decade, the production of hood films decreased—the result of changing taste and the industry’s incessant search for the next low-risk, high-profit film fad. Unlike in blaxploitation, however, the filmmakers associated with hood films (John Singleton, Allen and Albert Hughes, Ernest Dickerson, and Mario Van Peebles, among others) continued making Hollywood films. Many, such as those listed above, also began making films in other genres, from Westerns to horror films to action films, with white casts.

What remains of the hood film, or at least some of its conventions, can be found in films featuring rap personas, such as *Never Die Alone* (Ernest Dickerson, 2004), starring DMX, or *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* (Jim Sheridan, 2005), the story of 50 Cent’s rise to fame. There also continues to be a thriving straight-to-DVD market for low-budget films that incorporate hood conventions. Titles include *Leprechaun in the Hood* (Rob Spera, 2000), *Leprechaun: Back 2 Tha Hood* (Steven Ayromlooi, 2003), *Cutthroat Alley* (Timothy Wayne Folsome, 2003), and *Hood of the Living Dead* (Ed and Jose Quiroz, 2005). In these latter cases, directors and studios seem to be capitalizing on the continuing popularity and profitability of the formula while reducing the political and social message of some of their precursors.

African American urban cinema has a long history, from early gangster films geared toward segregated audiences to contemporary hood films with crossover appeal. Black city films often appeared at significant times—following early twentieth-century migration, the urban rebellions of the sixties and nineties, the contemporary economic and social abandonment of the city, and, most recently (in places such as Harlem, at least), redevelopment efforts and gentrification. The city often plays dual roles in African American film: it is a celebratory site enabling and signifying African American progress, and yet it is also a place of despair and literal and psychological imprisonment. In its many permutations, African American urban cinema records and revises the role of the city in black life. And although the generic codes may change over time (gangster, blaxploitation,

hood film) what remains constant is the dialogue that African American urban cinema has with African American urban life in particular—and, more generally, and American life as a whole.

## NOTES

1. Just a decade later, the opening of Coney Island's Luna Park illustrated the ways in which technologies (such as electricity) enabled leisure activities and entertainment pursuits. Luna Park's illuminated spectacle was recorded by Edwin S. Porter for Edison in *Coney Island at Night* (1905).

2. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 149.

3. After the novel's publication, hundreds of traveling stage troupes performed selections of the story for audiences nationwide. The novel was adapted numerous times during the silent era, including a 1903 Edison version, shot by Edwin Porter, with Porter in blackface. See Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 271. Other early adaptations include another from 1903 (Lubin); two in 1910 (Vitagraph, Thanyouser); two in 1913 (IMP, Kalem), one in 1914 (World Film), featuring Sam Lucas as the first African American Uncle Tom, one in 1918 (Famous Players-Lasky), one in 1919 (Mack Sennett Comedies) as a comedy titled *Uncle Tom without a Cabin*, and one in 1927 (Universal). Another fifty years passed before the novel was adapted for the screen again.

4. Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 55.

5. See Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 10. According to Guerrero, the plantation genre spans "approximately sixty years and depict[s] slaves and slavery in three broad phases of development," including such films as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Song of the South* (1946), and later films such as *Mandingo* (1975). The argument can be made that the plantation genre still exists in Hollywood film in a revised fashion; for example, films like *The Color Purple* (1985), *Amistad* (1997), and *Beloved* (1998). Spike Lee's satire *Bamboozled* (2000) addresses the continuation of this genre in its staging of a minstrel show on a southern plantation.

6. Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 103.

7. *Ibid.*, 116.

8. Prints of *The Railroad Porter* no longer exist; however, Zeinabu irene Davis, in her independent feature film *Compensation* (1999), remade sections of the film based on descriptions that appeared in the press when the film was first shown.

9. This is not to say that films such as *The Railroad Porter* did not have uplift intentions. The comedy was slapstick in nature, but the film focused on middle-class characters (a Pullman porter and his cuckolding wife) in middle-class settings.

10. Mary Carbine, "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905–1928," *Camera Obscura* 23 (Summer 1991): 14.

11. *Ibid.*



12. Quoted in Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Sourcebook on Black Films*, 2nd ed. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 155. Walton's comments originally appeared on September 11, 1920.

13. Micheaux's novels include *The Conquest* (1913), *The Forged Note* (1918), and *The Homesteader* (1918). George and Noble Johnson attempted to purchase the rights to the latter novel but pulled out of the deal when Micheaux insisted on directing the film and making a longer film than Lincoln normally produced (Sampson, 149).

14. For more on the film's complex signifying, including a discussion of its references to figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Booker T. Washington, see David A. Gerstner's *Manly Arts: Masculinity and Nation in Early American Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 83–118. Gerstner's book also provides an important discussion of struggles to define African American masculinity at this time.

15. Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 55. For more on this subject, see also Jane Gaines, *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, pages 226–244; Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003), 47–57; and others.

16. Even Alain Locke commented on the almost natural synergy between sound film and black voices, in which sound technology had the potential to reveal the "realism" of African American culture rather than the "hackneyed caricatures of motion picture representation." See Alain Locke and Sterling Brown, "Folk Values in a New Medium," *Black Films and Filmmakers*, ed. Lindsay Patterson (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1975), 26.

17. For more on *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!*, see Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Massood, *Black City Cinema*.

18. See Weisenfeld and Massood. See also Thomas Cripps, ed., *The Green Pastures* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

19. James Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54; Gerstner, *Manly Arts*, 191.

20. Dunham played Georgia Brown in the Broadway production of *Cabin in the Sky*. She was replaced by Horne for the Hollywood adaptation (perhaps because of Minnelli's friendship with Horne).

21. By 1943, West Coast cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco were experiencing rapid increases in their African American populations—the result of the opening of the defense industry to black workers. Andrew L. Stone's *Stormy Weather*, released the same year as *Cabin in the Sky* and featuring some of the same performers (Horne and Anderson, in particular) and Katherine Dunham's choreography, acknowledged even more openly the effects of African American migration on black arts and culture. In a story set between World Wars I and II, the film follows the careers and loves of a dancer (Bill "Bojangles" Robinson) and a singer (Horne) as they move from Harlem to Memphis, Chicago, and, finally, Hollywood.

22. For more on the gangster genre, see Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 81–110; and Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

23. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 222.

24. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 328.

25. Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 60–77.

26. Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 76.

27. Studies such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965) also demonized urban African Americans by indexing the ills of inner city life and suggesting that the black urban family was a national problem.

28. The code expressly forbade any scenes of miscegenation, for example. Once the code was dismantled, mixed-race sex scenes were common—especially in blaxploitation films, which tended to use such content to suggest the agency of the black male hero. See, for example, *Shaft*, *Superfly*, and *Mandingo*.

29. Van Peebles's filmmaking career actually began in France, where he made *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968), an adaptation of his novel *La Permission*. The film screened at the San Francisco Film Festival, where Van Peebles got the attention of Columbia.

30. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 86.

31. Huey P. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,'" *Black Panther* 6 (January 19, 1971): A–L. In his own book on the film, Van Peebles echoed Newton's observations. See Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (New York: Lancer, 1971), 36. For more on the subject of the film's responses, see Guerrero, 86–89, and Jon Hartmann, "The Trope of Blaxploitation in Critical Responses to Sweetback," *Film History: An International Journal* 6, no. 3 (1994).

32. Guerrero, 91–95. See also Mark Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 69–91; Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 88–91; and Massood, *Black City Cinema*, chapter 3.

33. Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 120.

34. For more on *Killer of Sheep*, see Paula J. Massood, "An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: *Killer of Sheep*, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse," in *Wide Angle* 22, no. 4 (October 1999): 20–41.

35. African American filmmakers continued making independent films. For example, many of the LA School filmmakers, including Burnett, Gerima, Dash, and Davis, made films (shorts and features) during the late seventies and eighties. There were also a number of filmmakers making documentary films, such as William Greaves and St. Claire Bourne.

36. Although *She's Gotta Have It* was independently financed, Lee has subsequently become, in the words of Craig Watkins, more of a "Black Commercial Independent," or a filmmaker-as-free-agent who develops projects and shops them around to various studios. Despite different relationships with studios over his

career, Lee manages to maintain creative control over his projects through his production company, Forty Acres & A Mule Filmworks (est. 1986). See S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 98–99.

37. For example, *Beat Street* was released shortly after *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (Daniel Petrie, 1981), a film that suggests that the Bronx consists solely of prostitutes and drug dealers (and users). As the title suggests, police man the sole outpost in this uncivilized wilderness. The film's title, along with some of its narrative elements, also suggests the revision of another genre, the Western—which, during the late seventies and early eighties, began to be located in urban areas, rather than the untamed western frontier.

38. Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) and Reginald Hudlin's *House Party* (1990) are additional examples of early, highly visible, and successful African American films from this time. Unlike Lee's films, however, these films do not feature the city as a significant component of their stories.

39. For example, Watkins suggests that the "consumer market for rap and tie-in commodities—in this case, popular film—grew substantially between 1985 and 1991" (196).

40. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough*, 91–92.

41. For more on the social and political factors affecting African American urban neighborhoods in the eighties and nineties, see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Robin D. G. Kelley, "Playing for Keeps: Pleasure and Profit in the Postindustrial Playground," in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997); Watkins, *Representing*; and Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?*

42. For more on the marketing and business of hood films, see Watkins, especially pages 169–195.

43. Not all hood films took such an optimistic approach to their subjects. For example, the Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) focuses on irredeemable characters and offers audiences an entirely different outcome. It, like *Boyz n the Hood*, was a tremendous success.

44. For more on this, see Keith Harris, "Clockers (Spike Lee 1995): Adaptation in Black," in *The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Paula J. Massood (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

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## Contemporary Independent Filmmakers

*Terri Francis*

The term “independent” is a capacious one that indicates a film’s financial as well as its aesthetic particulars. It generally means that a film is small-scale or low budget and has been produced with money provided or acquired outside the mainstream Hollywood studio system. Independent films tend to bring novel or controversial content and challenging, quirky aesthetics to moviegoing audiences. These characteristics might eliminate or, at least, make difficult the possibility of funding from the conservative major studios because of the perceived risks involved for the companies and their shareholders. In this case, filmmakers may need to use funding from private individuals, fellowships and grants, or personal assets. However, a filmmaker could choose to finance a film independently in order to maintain greater control over his or her material, from the perspective of style as well as content. At the same time, the mainstream and the independent margins merge closer to one another as the major studios seek to capitalize on the appeal of niche films to specialized audiences.

An independent film’s appeal might rise from its style or may be the result of an aspect of its content, but the underlying structure that shapes a film’s institutional status might be far more defining. For example, the *auteur* movement emergent in the 1950s, led by French critics and directors, emphasized film as the realized product of a single individual’s artistic vision. This perspective not only did much to raise the director’s prestige above that of other participants in the collaborative filmmaking process, but it also drew attention away from film as a commercial product, giving it art status. Whether a film is auteurist, star-driven, or studio-crafted, it goes through three clear phases between the page and the screen: production, distribution, and exhibition. The way that a filmmaker and his or her film move through this sequence defines their place on the continuum between independence and Hollywood.

## Spike Lee



*Columbia Pictures/Photofest*

Similar to Spike Lee's business model, filmmakers may decide to finance their films independently but distribute them through a major studio. The six major studios are Warner Brothers, Universal, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Columbia, and Disney/Buena Vista. If filmmakers do not have financing from a major distribution company, they may try to draw their attention at festivals, with the goal of pre-selling distribution rights. Specialized distributors—such as IFC Films, Kino, and Milestone—rent foreign and independent films to colleges, art cinemas, and museums. These films tend to have a lower profile relative to blockbuster films, but a measure of significant success within a niche is possible for specialty independent films.

The contemporary independent scene includes experimental filmmakers such as Christopher Harris, who creates and distributes his short films with little or no outside participation on the production side—however, he does acquire grants and other private funding in order to complete his works and show them at experimental film festivals. Some distance apart from Harris on the continuum, documentary filmmaker Shola Lynch presides over her own company, Realside Productions. Lynch gained public television funding for her Peabody award-winning documentary *Chisholm '72, Unbought and Unbossed*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival before being aired on PBS's P.O.V. series. For additional support, Lynch

partnered with Rock the Vote and the White House Project for Voter Registration and Women's Leadership Outreach—organizations that suited her subject. The film is now distributed by Twentieth Century Fox on DVD so that it can be placed in mainstream venues. Julie Dash produced *Daughters of the Dust* with the assistance of several coproducers, funding from public television, and other sources. Kino picked up the distribution of *Daughters*, illustrating how foreign, art house, and independent films share similar distribution circuits. Lee's filmmaking strategy exemplifies a model that integrates independent and mainstream structures.

Lee's 1986 film *She's Gotta Have It* demonstrated the aesthetic and financial attractions of an author-driven independent film and greatly influenced the renewed indie trend in American film that followed in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The success of African American and white American independent films ran parallel, if still on financially unequal terms during the 1990s. Building upon the success of African American masculinist films of the early 1990s, *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991; Columbia production, Columbia distribution), *Straight out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991; MGM Home Video),<sup>2</sup> and *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992; Paramount Pictures/Paramount Home Video), the woman-centered and literary *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemmons, 1997; Trimark [now Lion's Gate]) was the highest grossing independent film of 1997. Made with an estimated budget of \$5 million, it grossed an impressive estimated figure of \$15 million.<sup>3</sup>

When asked how he defined independent filmmaking, Lee said, "I consider myself an independent filmmaker who more often than not uses Hollywood—the Hollywood system—for financing and distribution."<sup>4</sup> He finances most of his films independently through his company, 40 Acres and a Mule, but sells the distribution rights to major studios such as Columbia. Similarly, independent filmmaker Kasi Lemmons recently completed a feature, *Talk to Me* (2007), within the Hollywood system. Although the subject matter, the career and cultural influence of a 1960s Washington D.C. disc jockey, is somewhat obscure, the film stars Don Cheadle, a major Hollywood figure who has also produced small, significant films. The film is being released by Focus Features, which is the specialty film unit of NBC Universal, formed in 2004, through the combining of NBC and Vivendi Universal Entertainment.<sup>5</sup> As larger corporations buy smaller independent firms, the contemporary independent film scene takes on greater complexity. Thus the term "independent" is less an absolute designation; instead, it is a continuum on which a number of financial practices can be located. Led by Lee, African American independent filmmakers were on the forefront of the hybrid indie-Hollywood model in the 1990s.

To put independent films into context, "films released by the majors attract 95 percent of ticket sales in the United States and Canada and more than half of the international market." In the early 2000s, a typical

Hollywood film was made for \$50 million dollars and an additional \$30 million was required to produce the film. Leslie Harris's *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1992) was shot, with \$100,000 that the director raised herself in seventeen days, using available light and real locations. In 1993, when the film won the Jury Prize at Sundance, the film distributor Miramax acquired it and a theatrical release followed. For comparison, in 2002 when Gina Prince-Bythewood made her first film, *Love and Basketball*, with financing from New Line, her budget was around \$15 million. In an interview with Harris for *indiewire.com*, Prince-Bythewood said that she did not consider *Love and Basketball*, starring Omar Epps, an independent film, although many filmgoers would describe it as exactly that, if only because film with African American casts, directors, and dramatic or romantic storylines are not centralized in the mainstream. Another independent credit is that *Love and Basketball* was coproduced by Lee's company, 40 Acres and a Mule. As the two filmmakers discussed the production history of their first films, both of which premiered at Sundance nearly a decade apart, I was struck by the blurring of the lines between mainstream and independent films and the need to recognize the way the changing financial structure of the film industry—as well as the incorporation of independent styles and issues into the mainstream—affect contemporary filmmakers.<sup>6</sup>

The production phase includes all of the elements of writing, visualizing, casting, funding, and filming. Distribution policies determine the holders of the film's exhibition rights and recipients of income from showing the movie. The distributor is responsible for marketing and making the film visible to the determined audiences. Exhibition is the third major phase, when the film is actually up on the screen for paying audiences to see. Some independent films have theatrical releases that have been organized and financed by the distributor, who has a relationship with one or more chains of cinemas. A theatrical release may mean that the film can be seen across the country or even worldwide on thousands of screens. Or it might be a graduated release, in which a film premieres in New York and Los Angeles and then later in other cities. A film may also have a limited release in certain cities and never make it beyond a few locations. A blockbuster film could be in the theaters for months, but an independent offering such as the rerelease of William Greaves's *cinéma vérité* piece *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968)—a respected accomplishment by a well-known, celebrated documentary filmmaker—might be available merely for a weekend, even in a specialty cinema such as IFC Center in New York, which opened in the Waverly Theatre in June 2005.<sup>7</sup> Different from Film Forum, which shows experimental films and revivals in its repertoire, IFC screens new documentary features, foreign films, and American independent films.<sup>8</sup> This example also demonstrates that not all movie theaters



are the same: they do not all show any and every movie, even if audiences may patronize them somewhat indiscriminately.

Contemporary independent films can be seen in nontheatrical venues such as colleges, museums, libraries, and even outdoor screening events. Film festivals are a major way that audiences and independent films connect, sometimes in screenings with the director present for post-film discussions. Independent films also move through a circuit of art house cinemas in cities such as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Hartford, Connecticut. Almost every city, large or small, has at least one remaining movie theater, such as Film Forum or IFC, that specializes in revivals of the classics, foreign films, documentaries, or newly released independent films. For instance, the newly restored print of Charles Burnett's thesis film, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), was initially released in New York, but its Web site shows a schedule of travel to the Angelika Film Center in Dallas, Texas; the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, Tennessee; Market Street Cinema in Little Rock, Arkansas; and the Urban Institute for the Contemporary Arts, among many other locations. *Killer's* distribution marks out an archipelago of independent film theaters across the country in places that might seem on the margins of avant-garde cinema.<sup>9</sup> Black independent films can be seen in screening spaces associated with a museum or college or a freestanding historical landmark that has been restored and supported with government or private support.

Most of the films that are shown in the major venues for independent films are not those of the African American or African Diaspora scenes. Thus, entrepreneurial spirits within the film world have created a number of organizations for supporting the production, distribution, and exhibition of independent black films. In 1978 filmmaker Warrington Hudlin founded the Black Filmmaker Foundation, together with Alric Nembhard (business consultant) and George Cunningham (educator), in order to make an independent space for training, employment, networking opportunities, and screening space for African American filmmakers. Following a significant cluster of black independent films coming out of University of California, Los Angeles, and a series of independent-Hollywood hybrids known as blaxploitation, this organization was positioned to capitalize on the momentum that audiences, critics, and filmmakers generated around these films. Since 1999, the group has maintained an Internet presence called DvrepUBLIC.com, which features online discussion groups and information on independent film showings in a theater or on television. DvrepUBLIC's concern with television as well as theaters marks a significant shift in exhibition and distribution practices for films. Today, television has become a factor, if not a partner, in independent film viewing and distribution—through cable networks such as HBO, IFC, and Sundance, as well as DVD rental companies such as Netflix, which make a wide range of black

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One-sheet poster for Charles Burnett's 1977 film *Killer of Sheep*

MILESTONE FILM &  
STEVEN SODERBERGH PRESENT  
A FILM BY CHARLES BURNETT

"A FLAT-OUT TREASURE. IMPERVIOUS TO TIME!"  
—JAY CARR, *BOSTON GLOBE*

# KILLER OF SHEEP



*Mypheduh Films/Photofest*

independent films available to viewers. Organizations designed to support black independent films include the BFF's Acapulco Film Festival, now the American Black Film Festival in Miami, the Newark Black Film Festival, and the PanAfrican Film and Television Festival, FESPACO, which takes place in Burkina Faso every two years.<sup>10</sup>

Wherever they are shown, black independent films have addressed a content gap in Hollywood filmmaking, but they also meet the film industry's needs for diversifying its products. From a historical perspective we see that black films in the wake of Melvin van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) hit screens at a time when the film industry was floundering financially: during the late 1960s, Hollywood was competing against the convenience, variety, and quality of television. Van Peebles's film identified a new formula, and new audiences—who flocked to see this black action film—and the film industry both banked on it. They financed a number of black-directed action films with black stars; some of these films, such as *Superfly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972), were independently produced and then distributed by a major studio, in this case Warner Brothers.

Black independent film is critically positioned as oppositional to dominant Hollywood. bell hooks offers this point of view on the particular contributions that a black filmmaker can make:

In the United States it has been assumed both in the past and in the present that a black filmmaker will construct black images, will focus on narrative content that highlights black experience, and that the images he or she creates will necessarily work against the stereotypically negative ones represented by the white mainstream.<sup>11</sup>

hooks's description highlights many audience members' assumption that there is a natural and required correspondence between the filmmaker's identity and what is seen on the screen, via his or her supposed responsibility to intervene in the history of negative black images. Thomas Cripps examined the viability of similar logic when he wrote:

[B]lack film may be defined as those motion pictures made for theater distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience. In the latter part of this century, this definition might be expanded to include major motion pictures and other projects made for television, as well as films that, despite foreign origins in, say, Africa, speak to Afro-American concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Cripps takes into account the main elements of a film's life, production, distribution, and exhibition before it reaches the screen and makes room to think about the influence of new technologies and the diasporic shape of black cinema. Cripps allows that very few films meet these narrow criteria, citing the example of early independent filmmaker Eloice Gist. Together with her pastor husband, she wrote, directed, produced, and distributed religious black-cast dramas that were aimed at black church audiences during cinema's silent era. These independent films were not destined for a theatrical release, although they found African American audiences in specific alternative venues. Both hooks and Cripps acknowledge, in different ways, the complexities and limitations that come into play when defining black film narrowly. What is at stake, however, is the connection between the concepts of independence and intervention as film historians and others think about the definition of contemporary black film. By being independent financially, filmmakers and others with a vested interest in the films express hopes to correct misrepresentations of black people by issuing new humanistic portrayals, and many film consumers agree.

Speaking in a documentary, *We've Gotta Have It* (1992), Edward Mapp emphasizes the black independent filmmaker's role in "showing our side" and that "there is more out there" than images of African Americans as violent and hypersexualized. Mapp and others in the video share the perspective that "whoever puts up the money controls the image." Furman Lee, who works as a gaffer, worries that the images that are out there confirm the roles that blacks and Latinos have been given. Critical audiences ask how a given movie can speak to black community issues, instead of following the Hollywood formula. This documentary issued a clear call for what one interviewee described as films that depict a shared American experience, in which blacks participate in American citizenship.<sup>13</sup> The question of whether the masses of black folk are concerned about black images in film and support independent media is a vexed one, which haunts general discussion of contemporary independent filmmakers.

Charles Burnett has said, "The whole thing of Black filmmakers never really became an idea really until the late seventies, when festivals in Europe started to showcase Black independent filmmakers. It was recognized in Europe that there was a voice in America that was missing."<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Burnett continued, "the film industry [in Hollywood] was pretty much closed to people of color" in the 1970s. The quantitative answers as to who patronizes black film are beyond the scope of this essay, but critics such as Clyde Taylor and Tommy Lott have raised the theoretical dimensions of the issue in their writings. From a populist perspective, they have both lamented the gap that they have observed between black film and their audiences. In "The Paradox of Black Independent Cinema," Taylor writes:

But a certain character has been given the central flow of recent Black independent films from its origins with the American university. The conspicuous body of Black independents has been called, not without reason, intellectual filmmakers. It helps to see this description as one half of an antagonistic dialogue over intellectual versus populist Black cinema . . . the intellectual, university-trained cinema has had some success in winning restrained respect in art and culture quarters. But does not that limited success mask and cushion the lack of success in its stated aim—to reach the black community in ways that advance self-definition through cinematic self-examination?<sup>15</sup>

Taking a different angle, Lott asks what it means when most of the audiences for black independent films are white art house moviegoers. The late Perry Henzell (my reference to him raises the question of the “white” filmmaker handling “black” material) commented on this issue at a screening of his film *The Harder They Come* (1972) in Paris in 2005. He said that people don’t always go to see themselves on the screen. He went on to say, trying to conceptualize the film’s appeal outside of Jamaica, that the people whose lives are depicted in *The Harder They Come* already know their story, but the kind of people who are attracted to *The Harder They Come* want to see something different.<sup>16</sup> A dominant model of cinema viewing foregrounds its processes of identification, which can be both pleasurable and traumatic.<sup>17</sup> But curiosity, wonder, and a taste for the unseen may also be strong, even stronger, drives that draw audiences to watch what they watch.

This “antagonistic” dialogue, as Taylor put it, is imbricated with issues beyond content and style and even beyond the notion of “responsibility.” There is layered here the cringing issue of exposure: who can look at this?<sup>18</sup> What does it mean that some of the best, most subtle characterizations of African American protagonists are dismissed by many because of their apparent lack of appeal to black audiences? In the first place, why do we assume that any black person will or should identify with characters on the screen because they are black? What is it about American formations of blackness that lead viewers to decode the nuances of a movie in terms of identity and a concept of the real, rather than fantasy? White people certainly do not identify with a film because the protagonists or the cast members are white, do they? Are they not just as apt to dismiss out of hand what they consider artsy-fartsy, slow films that do not have a recognizable generic form? Audiences surprise, however, as they did with independent films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and the subtitled, independent, foreign film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2003). However, these films—commercially successful independent films—tend to be a careful blend of an expected genre with new elements added for novelty.

In this way, they reach out to wider audiences, achieve prestige, as well as meet the expectations of the core audiences. Spike Lee's films—from *She's Gotta Have It* to *When the Levees Broke*—have successfully innovated a formula for appealing to many audiences and “crossing over” without losing what I would call the core audience of his peers—other black intellectuals. Still, this question of the meanings and dimensions of the “black” in black independent cinema remains open, because the term is not as roomy as “independent”—rather, it is as similarly roomy, but the antagonism within the variations on black identity is more intimate, sometimes searing, and more contentious.

Taylor, David Nicholson, who founded *Black Film Review*, and filmmaker Zeinabu Irene Davis engaged in a debate that was republished in the pages of *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*. Writing in the late 1980s, Taylor gave a critique of black independent cinema through a populist-intellectual dichotomy, in which populism is privileged as the route to a truer black independent cinema. He wants to see work that is more relevant, perhaps using a model not of film as art but of film as information that communicates and connects to audiences' political needs. He cautions against “the isolated preoccupations with purist cultural nationalism on the one hand and (western) aestheticism on the other.”<sup>19</sup> He continues—initially seeming in some moments to credit Lee for his risky navigation of this dilemma and then at other times criticizing him for his films' ambiguous, sometimes overt capitulations to intellectualism—to challenge black filmmakers and audiences to examine what black independent films bring to “this process of writing and rewriting the informational space that Black people share with the rest of the world.”<sup>20</sup> This process is, in Taylor's mind, fundamental to the activist role of the black artist in film, theater, or other art forms. Taylor ends his essay with a powerfully expressed lamentation:

Something is called for, and it is not just the responsibility of the filmmakers to close out the damaging paradox of the present Black independent scene. Namely, that situated in the most advanced and powerful medium, and exploding a decade ago with transgressive energy, it has allowed itself to become the tamest, least expressive, least dangerous form of contemporary Black expression.<sup>21</sup>

Taylor's words speak for themselves, and I recall them here to demonstrate the visceral, subtle level at which the philosophical debates on black independent films and filmmakers occur. In many ways, by inciting such reactions, black independent cinema has already performed a significant, transformative service to black cultural life.

Nicholson, for his part, finds “the auteur complex too limited an explanation for the poor quality of so many films.”<sup>22</sup> The paradox that concerns

him is not between filmmaker's goals of reaching black audiences and the lack of black audiences for black independent films, but rather in its status as "a creature both promising and problematic."<sup>23</sup> His concerns highlight a thread in black independent cinema that aspires to a classical narrative form of filmmaking. He notes a malaise in black independent cinema in which the issue is less that of audience, as in Taylor's critique, but more that of low production values and what he sees as poorly constructed stories that do not say anything about—nor perhaps to—the African American community. He cites Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* as one film that is compelling in its visuals but, for him, totally repellent in its "languorous pace, a taking itself seriously-in-the-worst-kind-of-way quality."<sup>24</sup> His caution is justly against the danger of black independent films being mere curiosities for any and all movie audiences, rather than being work that is both reflective of unique African American cultural traits and appealing to a range of audiences, particularly the core black audience—who, want to see, in his words, "folk we know" up on the screen.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, he and Taylor share the desire for black films to communicate something clearly and tangibly in an artistic way.

Davis's intervention in this debate defended independent filmmakers against the scholars' assessments of the films' "shortcomings such as stylistic inaccessibility and structural inadequacy," as she pointed out the contradictions in Taylor and Nicholson's arguments. Although the critics seem to call for work that is culturally specific to African Americans, they also call for work that adheres to familiar Hollywood forms, especially when it comes to production values. Davis writes, "But why should we ape Hollywood when it already pimps whatever aesthetics we may develop in our films? (A case in point, Melvin van Peebles *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* helped to launch Hollywood's Blaxploitation Era.) What independent Black filmmakers are creating is a new cinematic language in our films."<sup>26</sup> Davis hits on a key dilemma when she raises the issue of the way in which the model of black music is used to examine black film. She writes, "Nicholson calls for filmmakers to be like 'jazzmen' . . . Yet at the same time, he wants the filmmakers to adhere only to simple narrative structure. History shows us that jazzmen and women broke with form and tradition that they themselves had established in order to take music to a new level."<sup>27</sup> Finally, Davis questions the critics' underestimation of black audiences, and she makes room for experimental narrative structures and the viewers to see those structures within the aesthetic and social spheres of contemporary black independent film.

This discussion among Taylor, Nicholson, and Davis lays out the central issues facing independent filmmakers working in fiction, documentary, and avant-garde forms, whether the work is feature-length or short form. As the financial structure of the film industry continues to change and

more African American filmmakers are incorporated into Hollywood on a hybrid indie-studio model or as studio directors, many critics miss a more purely oppositional, not merely alternative, position. In a 2006 interview with *Black Camera*, Manthia Diawara summarized his own assessment, as well as those of many of his peers, of contemporary independent cinema:

Black American independent cinema of the '70s and '80s—particularly around UCLA, called the LA Rebellion [had] filmmakers like Charles Burnett, Billy Woodbury, Julie Dash, etc. These filmmakers were using films in a very powerful manner . . . They had a Black aesthetics that one could compare to Black music—you know, the Blues, the vernacular. Then came Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). Very edgy. Very interesting. Also, independent—and it's a movie that could be shown in movie theaters . . . [Audiences] began to watch Spike Lee and he becomes the Black filmmaker. It was positive . . . but it was unfortunate because it did not lead to a new language of Black cinema. It killed independent cinema . . . Our whole conference was based on the question of where we are going after *She's Gotta Have It*.<sup>28</sup>

Diawara, like Davis, highlights the aesthetic analogies to black music—this time the blues, not jazz. What they both suggest, however, is the importance of film's connection to the vernacular in black culture, knowing that the vernacular does not always mean that black audiences immediately recognize the forms. In terms of film, audiences are accustomed to the modes of Hollywood cinema. The classic version of this mode, not accounting for shifts brought about by independent cinema, usually refers to the following formal elements: a clearly defined, heroic protagonist who pursues specific, admirable goals and achieves them despite opposing odds. This narrative arc from struggle to resolution should be rendered with synced sound, suitable music, and fairly rapid pacing and editing that maintain the viewer's spatial orientation across the various and varying shots—as well as suture the viewer to the protagonist through medium close-ups and point-of-view shots. Think Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006). Smith plays a down-and-out salesman who goes from homelessness to being a millionaire through his wits and perseverance, bolstered by the love of his son. It is the American Dream. I am not certain what musical form such a film might link to—perhaps hip-hop—but the blues to which Diawara refers tell an entirely different story.

California, the setting of *The Pursuit of Happyness* and home to Hollywood, is not traditionally blues territory. In contrast to Hollywood's tendency toward resolving social tensions and personal difficulties, Ralph Ellison described the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful detail and



episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jazzed grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."<sup>29</sup> The blues, in other words, is about things not working out, so, in this sense, it is antithetical to Hollywood, even if blues musicians and soundtracks have been incorporated into Hollywood films. In the blues, singers triumph over circumstances because of what they can do with their experiences, not necessarily because they triumph over them and find clean, happy resolutions for the problems in their lives or in the world. Hollywood tends to prefer a happy ending and the idea of clear winners and losers. Structurally, the blues borrowed harmony and formal devices, including vocal techniques, from work songs and spirituals. Although the songs often relied on a style of call and response (between audience and singer or between singer and instrument), but the music was sung by an individual—not a chorus. Compared to the earlier forms on which the blues drew, the style was secular. The blues offered "no heavenly grace or home but offered instead a stylized complaint about earthly trials and troubles, a complaint countered, if at all, by the flickering promise of a good time or loving companion." The blues involves improvisation and is characterized by particular sounds—such as trains, conversational whispers, sexual groans, shouts, and stories. The singer might strike a voice between speaking and singing and groaning. But how do these elements translate to film? Diawara refers to a blues-like vernacularity in the black independent films of the 1970s and 1980s. Davis writes of black music as a critical framework for film analysis, but how can a blues idiom be located in film?

In an interview with Phyllis Klotman, founder of the Black Film Center/Archive at Indiana University, Hudlin described "those stories that had blues values, by blues values I mean stories that showed a toughness of spirit and a transcendence by the speaker, not through any kind of happy ending or resolution of philosophy but rather that they just simply persevered."<sup>30</sup> These are the kind of stories he aimed for in his *cinéma vérité* work *Street Corner Stories* (1977). The independent film, like the potential of the critical black presence in American society, questions the status quo and bears witness to America's broken promises, even as individuals work within and against its institutions. Rather than focusing on achievement, the blues links hearers to the widely shared experience of struggle. In this sense, the unresolved, slow, circular narratives of the black independent films can be seen as blues-idiom films, even if their musical associations are with other musical forms because of the blues' foundational relationship to American music. Returning to the example of *The Pursuit of Happyness*, which is based on the true story of Chris Gardner's success, let's read it against the grain and imagine it in a totally different style. If it were remade

as a blues movie, it might look like Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984), Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, or Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1979). These films take a blues perspective on economic struggle that emphasizes oppressive economic structures embodied in bosses, social workers, and other figures of their social environments. Like the blues singer/songwriter and like the film director, the protagonist of the blues-idiom film puts realities into poetic order, albeit cinematically, without necessarily resolving them in ways that satisfy the viewing audience. These blues films link Los Angeles to traditional blues territories of Memphis and New Orleans.

*Killer of Sheep's* production history turned out to have a happy ending, but it did not follow the normative route from production to distribution to exhibition. Burnett's film, finished thirty years ago as a thesis film, has been restored, revived, and returned to movie theaters through a partnership between a film distributor, Milestone, and an archive, UCLA Film Archive. Set in the Los Angeles Watts community, in the decades following the uprisings of the late 1960s, *Killer of Sheep* is being praised for its unsentimental, complex portrayal of a sleepless, depressed family man and worker. Still, *Killer of Sheep's* exceptionality, both when it was first seen and at its return, should not overshadow its place within a wider context of black cinema. After the works of pioneer independent feature film directors, such as van Peebles, Michael Schultz, and Lee, came the 1980s works of Robert Townsend, Keenen Ivory Wayans, and Hudlin, and then the 1990s films of Burnett, Gerima, Euzhan Palcy, Dash, and Lemmons. Bill Duke's forty film credits must be counted, as well as John Singleton's Academy Award nomination and the multidimensional authorship of Forest Whitaker, Halle Berry, and Oprah Winfrey, which have brought decades' worth of rich and richly uneven African American characters and stories to the screen. Given all of this history, this thirty-year-old, student-made, low-key, black-and-white evocation of a humble, sensual man and his emotional capacities is startling—then inevitable. A sympathetic portrayal of a nonentertaining black man—vulnerable yet unvictimized, troubled but not trouble, mythic but regular—on screen can still cause a stir because it seems unprecedented. Stan (Henry G. Sanders) exemplifies the blues figure, who is alienated by circumstances and unable to find satisfying intimacy with the opposite or desired sex, but who finds humanity in an uncanny capacity to put feelings of frustration, confusion, and sadness into poetic order, as Stan does in the scene where he remembers the warm feeling of a woman's forehead during lovemaking. It is a small detail, the description of which ties Stan to the vitality from which he now feels alienated.

That Burnett's film, finished thirty years ago, is only now being seen outside cinema studies classes and other specialized venues is cause for celebration. But I hope it gives audiences pause to wonder what other black film

treasures have been lost, hidden, or otherwise obscured by poor marketing, politically or aesthetically challenging forms or subject matter, misinterpretation by initial audiences, including film critics and scholars, or all three factors. The open question of whether this film reaches black audiences is worth asking, despite the answers' elusive nature. What do we watch? What is there for us to see? What does a good film—a good black film—look like? Underlying these questions are the interconnecting issues of accessibility, availability, and exposure. What can we watch? What do we view as options to see? What establishes our criteria for judging the movies that we see?

In many ways, *Killer of Sheep* is unique and unprecedented, if only because it is both historical and contemporary, having been twice released. What's more, it has affinities with a cohort of independently financed movies that share its relatively unseen predicament. These are the "LA Rebellion" films to which Diawara refers. Several politicized UCLA film students produced them, as thesis films or first films, during the 1970s and early 1980s. Criticized for their intellectual bent and low production values, the African American filmmakers of the West Coast group drew on a rich cultural base that included Italian Neo-Realist sensibilities and French New Wave stylistics. Consistent with Hudlin and others, one of the associated filmmakers, Larry Clark strived for an American blues for filmmaking in his film, *Passing Through* (1997).

*Passing Through* uses a stream-of-consciousness structure to allow for long sequences in which the images of the musician, Warmack (Nathaniel Taylor), playing with his band dissolve to newsreel footage of confrontations between blacks and police, suggesting the political and historical sources of his musical traditions. It is perhaps the most structurally avant-garde of all of the West Coast films even as it has a strong narrative core: a jazz musician, imprisoned for his role in protecting and defending a friend, tries to find his mentor on his release from prison and organize his fellow musicians into a self-contained economic unit. Along the way, he falls in love; the couple goes through a realistic pattern of romance to meaningful cohesion. The film gives a rare portrait of a multidimensional love relationship while also seeking free-form experimental structure, a process that can be compared to John Cassavettes's efforts with *Shadows* (1959). In an interview with Phyllis Klotman, Clark expressed his wish to build a repertory situation with a company of actors that played different characters over a number of films.<sup>31</sup> Cowritten with Ted Lange, who played Isaac on the *Love Boat*, Clark's film starred Nathaniel Taylor, who played Lamont's friend, the character Rollo, on *Sanford and Son*. These artists' involvement in *Passing Through* enables us to envision professional artistic lives beyond the narrow character roles that the actors filled in the mainstream.

*Killer*, *Passing Through*, *Bush Mama*, and *Bless Their Little Hearts* all feature men and women done wrong by the welfare, medical, housing, or prison

systems. They are depressed by work or lack of work. They are alive and compelling still, without being exoticized; they are vulnerable and fragile without being left victimized—because the writers and directors foreground the characters' capacities for basic understanding, pleasure, and peace of mind; they draw empathy, not pity, from the viewer. For example, Gerima's *Bush Mama* features letters between a couple separated by the man's jail sentence. There are striking sequences in the movie in which we are compelled to contemplate Dorothy's (Barbara O's) face and imagine her ideas and perspective during long shots of her in which she seems lost in thought. In *Killer*, we see Stan sipping his coffee, doing household chores, and being lost in his thoughts. They are more slowly paced than mainstream films because they use long takes. This technique, together with the sparing use of close-ups, emphasizes the environment around the character. Thus these are introspective films that seek to explore the interior lives of black characters through their means of expression and contemplation relative to their environment.

Politically, Clark and his peers sought to link independent black American cinema practices and concerns to anticolonialist film movements in Cuba, Brazil, West Africa, and elsewhere. The LA blues filmmakers, like most minority filmmakers, aimed to redress misrepresentations of their communities in the narrative cinema, which date back to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), by creating what they felt were complex African American protagonists, within stories that showed film audiences the range of black worlds beyond those of crime and entertainment. Given their concerns with intersecting issues of race, gender, and class, Clark, Burnett, Gerima, and Woodberry created cinematic blues figures to communicate their investigations of the way that economic struggles troubled both individual psyches and the tones of family interaction in their films.

The emphasis of the blues aesthetic on the common man or woman extended to the casting of the films. They were filmed on location, using a mixture of professional and nonactors; people who lived in the film location neighborhoods were trained to operate the equipment. In this way, Burnett and his peers, including Gerima and Clark, sought to establish their work in communities outside their educational institution. In the Klotman interview, Clark said that no film studies students worked on *Passing Through*. This level of community involvement is significant; it helps dismantle the alienated position that is sometimes imposed on black art films because they may be more widely viewed by white audiences. Written and oral film histories are at odds on this point. Yet by putting them in dialogue, we may now have a fuller picture of the early-contemporary (post-Civil Rights era) independent filmmakers, allowing a better sense of the continuities and disjunctures that took place with the popularity of Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*. Lee's black-and-white art film about a woman defending her sexuality against her lovers, friends, and

family members struck at an opportune moment—or the film struck in such a way that its moment seemed opportune and perfectly suited to its success. From 1986, we can look backward in history over blaxploitation and the LA blues filmmakers toward the race movies of the 1920s.

Oscar Micheaux modeled independent filmmaking for the artists and entrepreneurs that followed. His films addressed topics and presented narratives and characters that were overlooked and absent in mainstream films. Micheaux initially financed his films through selling his autobiography and novels, but, after the Depression, he teamed up with white film distributors and producers. During the 1960s Greaves trained a number of film technicians and directors through his public access television show, *Black Journal*, who went on to influence the independent film world. After 1986 Lee emerged as the star of black cinema, with an innovative way—that recalls Micheaux—of partnering with major studios to partially finance or distribute his films. Diawara and others may blame Lee for “killing” independent black filmmaking, but if there is a dearth of production, it may be largely as a result of unsuitable or poorly defined measures of success. What does a good film—a good black film—look like? How important is it to define black film? Can a filmmaker be a black filmmaker and a Hollywood filmmaker?

What happened after 1986 is that Lee’s success made it interesting to consider the possibilities of working on one’s own agenda and gaining a relatively high amount of mainstream success that competes with or betters Hollywood. The black filmmaker could keep it real, while enjoying success and sharing power with the majority. Audience expectations changed, and a new cluster of film school graduates created polished films that matched the beats and rhymes of hip-hop. Although Lee may challenge some of the negative values now associated with the music, he is a hip-hop director in many ways; his rise is linked to the explosion of hip-hop in the 1980s and 1990s, as *Do the Right Thing* (1989) features Public Enemy’s song “Fight the Power.” His films and his characters carved out a thoughtful, comic presence within that scene, even as his work represented an independent vision within the larger Hollywood machine. Hip-hop, unlike the blues, is less about perseverance and persistence. Nor is it necessarily about triumph. It is rather more about resistance and getting over—finding a way within a larger controlling context.

Hollywood’s budgets can ensure that its products generate a seamless, absorbing visual aesthetic in which the structure and reality of the film are hidden and the editing is transparent and smooth. Whether a black independent filmmaker’s goal is to seek a new film language and expose the structure of film, by slowing it down, or to blend African American cultural content with Hollywood forms, the relationship to Hollywood seems to be the constant alluring siren that shapes and reshapes the meanings of independent films. If film follows the same trajectory as black music, the whole question of black independent cinema lands on a blue note.

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### FILMOGRAPHY

|      |                                                  |                                                                                     |
|------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1920 | <i>Within Our Gates</i>                          | Oscar Micheaux; Micheaux Book and Film Company.                                     |
| 1941 | <i>The Blood of Jesus</i>                        | Spencer Williams; Amegro Films/Sack Entertainment Enterprises.                      |
| 1959 | <i>Shadows</i>                                   | John Cassavettes; Lion International.                                               |
| 1964 | <i>Nothing but a Man</i>                         | Michael Roemer; DuArt/Nothing but a Man Company.                                    |
| 1968 | <i>Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One</i>           | William Greaves; Take One Productions/Criterion DVD, 2006.                          |
| 1971 | <i>Sweet Sweetback's BaadAssss Song</i>          | Melvin van Peebles; Yeah.                                                           |
| 1972 | <i>The Harder They Come</i>                      | Perry Henzell; International Films/New World Pictures.                              |
| 1973 | <i>The Spook Who Sat by the Door</i>             | Ivan Dixon; Bokan/United Artists.                                                   |
| 1973 | <i>Wattstax</i>                                  | Mel Stuart; Stax Records/Columbia                                                   |
| 1977 | <i>Killer of Sheep</i>                           | Charles Burnett; Mypheduh Films until 2006; Milestone Film and Video.               |
| 1977 | <i>Passing Through</i>                           | Larry Clark; Mypheduh Films.                                                        |
| 1977 | <i>Street Corner Stories</i>                     | Warrington Hudlin.                                                                  |
| 1978 | <i>Rockers</i>                                   | Ted Bafaloukos; Rockers Film Corporation; Blue Sun Films; Music Video Distributors. |
| 1979 | <i>Bush Mama</i>                                 | Haile Gerima; Tricontinental Film Center (1979); Mypheduh Films.                    |
| 1982 | <i>Losing Ground</i>                             | Kathleen Collins; Mypheduh Films.                                                   |
| 1984 | <i>Bless Their Little Hearts</i>                 | Billy Woodberry.                                                                    |
| 1984 | <i>Hairpiece: A Film for Nappy-Headed People</i> | Ayoka Chenzira; Red Carnelian Home Video/Women Make Movies.                         |
| 1986 | <i>She's Gotta Have It</i>                       | Spike Lee; 40 Acres and A Mule Filmworks/Criterion.                                 |
| 1986 | <i>Crocodile Conspiracy</i>                      | Zeinabu Irene Davis; Third World Newsreel Film Collective.                          |
| 1987 | <i>Eyes on the Prize I and II</i>                | Henry Hampton; Blackside Productions/Public Broadcasting Service.                   |
| 1987 | <i>Hollywood Shuffle</i>                         | Robert Townsend; Conquering Unicorn; Samuel Goldwyn Company,                        |
| 1989 | <i>Cycles</i>                                    | Zeinabu Irene Davis.                                                                |
| 1989 | <i>Do the Right Thing</i>                        | Spike Lee; 40 Acres and A Mule Filmworks/Universal.                                 |
| 1991 | <i>Boyz in the Hood</i>                          | John Singleton; Columbia Pictures Corporation.                                      |
| 1991 | <i>Daughters of the Dust</i>                     | Julie Dash; American Playhouse/Geechee Girls/Kino.                                  |

|      |                                                       |                                                                                                                          |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1991 | <i>Straight out of Brooklyn</i>                       | Matty Rich; American Playhouse/Blacks in Progress/Samuel Goldwyn Company.                                                |
| 1992 | <i>Just Another Girl on the IRT</i>                   | Leslie Harris; Miramax/Truth 24 F.P.S.                                                                                   |
| 1992 | <i>Juice</i>                                          | Ernest Dickerson; Island World/Paramount.                                                                                |
| 1992 | <i>Deep Cover</i>                                     | Bill Duke; New Line.                                                                                                     |
| 1993 | <i>Sankofa</i>                                        | Haile Gerima; Mypheduh.                                                                                                  |
| 1995 | <i>Strands</i>                                        | Lorna Ann Johnson.                                                                                                       |
| 1996 | <i>Watermelon Woman</i>                               | Cheryl Dunye; Dancing Girl/First Run Features.                                                                           |
| 1997 | <i>Eve's Bayou</i>                                    | Kasi Lemmons; Chubbco/Lions Gate.                                                                                        |
| 1998 | <i>Tree Shade</i>                                     | Lisa Collins; Wing and a Prayer Productions/Women Make Movies.                                                           |
| 2002 | <i>String of Pearls</i>                               | Camille Billops and James Hatch; Third World Newsreel Film Collective.                                                   |
| 2002 | <i>Love and Basketball</i>                            | Gina Prince-Bythewood; 40 Acres and A Mule Filmworks/New Line.                                                           |
| 2003 | <i>Beah: A Black Woman Speaks</i>                     | LisaGay Hamilton; LisaGay Inc./Women Make Movies/HBO.                                                                    |
| 2004 | <i>Reckless Eyeballing</i>                            | Christopher Harris.                                                                                                      |
| 2004 | <i>Chisholm '72, Unbought and Unbossed</i>            | Shola Lynch. Realside Productions/Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.                                              |
| 2005 | <i>Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2</i>              | William Greaves; Criterion.                                                                                              |
| 2006 | <i>When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts</i> | Spike Lee; 40 Acres and A Mule Filmworks/HBO.                                                                            |
| 2006 | <i>Dave Chappelle's Block Party</i>                   | Michel Gondry; Focus Features.                                                                                           |
| 2007 | <i>Talk to Me</i>                                     | Kasi Lemmons; Sidney Kimmel Entertainment/Mark Gordon Productions/Pelagius Films/The Mark Gordon Company/Focus Features. |

## RESOURCES

Bibliothèque du Film, Paris, France: <http://www.bifi.fr/public/index.php>  
 Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University: <http://www.indiana.edu/~bfca/index.html>  
 Black Film Promotional Materials Collection, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri; <http://library.wustl.edu/collections/#bfpm>  
 Black Film Research Online, University of Chicago: <http://blackfilm.uchicago.edu/>

British Film Institute, London, England: [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)

Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri;  
<http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/filmandmedia/collections/index.htm>.

## NOTES

1. The 1990s saw a rise in independent filmmaking, with edgy and stylish films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, Miramax, 1992) and *Safe* (Todd Haynes, Good Machine, 1995), as well as one of the most profitable films ever made, *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), which, with a budget of \$35,000, earned over \$130 million in the United States and Canada. The success of independent films and the small companies that produced them made these films very attractive to larger film companies—many of which were eventually incorporated into the major studios, beginning with Disney's 1993 purchase of Miramax. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 13–19.

2. According to [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) and other Internet industry sources, Rich made his film for an estimated \$450,000 and the film grossed \$2,712,293. Much of the financing was done on credit cards and donations from family members. *Straight Out of Brooklyn* won Best First Feature at the 1992 Independent Feature Awards.

3. Internet Movie Database; [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com).

4. Audrey T. McCluskey, "Telling Truth and Taking Names: An Interview with Spike Lee," *Black Camera* 19, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 9.

5. According to information available through the Focus Features Web site, NBC Universal is 80 percent owned by General Electric and 20 percent owned by Vivendi Universal. <http://www.focusfeatures.com/home.php> (accessed June 3, 2007).

6. Interview between Leslie Harris and Gina Prince-Bythewood is dated January 25, 2000. It can be found online at [http://www.indiewire.com/ots/fes\\_00Sund\\_000126\\_leslie.html](http://www.indiewire.com/ots/fes_00Sund_000126_leslie.html) (accessed June 3, 2007).

7. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968) was produced by Greaves through Take One Productions. The distributor for the 2005 theatrical rerelease is Janus Films, and the DVD is distributed through the Criterion Collection. In 2006 Criterion took on the DVD release of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*.

8. IFC Films is a theatrical film distribution company that is part of IFC Entertainment, along with IFC Productions, the theater IFC Center, and a digital production group called InDigEnt. IFC stands for the Independent Film Channel. Owned by Cablevision, it was launched in 1994 as a network "dedicated to independent film 24 hours a day, uncut, uncensored and commercial free." [http://www.cablevision.com/index.jhtml?pageType=joshua\\_sapan](http://www.cablevision.com/index.jhtml?pageType=joshua_sapan) (accessed June 3, 2007).

9. See <http://www.killerofsheep.com/screenings.html> (accessed June 3, 2007).

10. For a list of organizations and Internet resources that support contemporary black independent film, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~bfca/websites.html>.

11. bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Sex, Race and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 71.

12. Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 357.



13. Urban Video Project, *We've Gotta Have It* (New York: Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, 1992).

14. George Alexander. Interview with Charles Burnett. *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk about the Magic of Cinema* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 186.

15. Clyde Taylor, "The Paradox of Black Independent Cinema," in ed. Michael T. Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 434.

16. Perry Henzell expressed these ideas in response to my question about audiences and *The Harder They Come*. I asked him how *The Harder They Come* was received in the United States, particularly, in the context of blaxploitation and followed up by asking him about the reception of black film, generally. The film was initially censored and then very well received by Jamaicans, especially young people, when it was released in Kingston. Henzell traveled with the film thereafter seeking international distribution. In doing so, he said he felt he had to distinguish it from blaxploitation in many ways. This question-and-answer session followed the July screening of *The Harder They Come* as part of the 2005 Paris Cinema program Reggae and Cinema, which took place at Entrepôt, Paris, France.

17. Two excellent references with which to begin a study of psychoanalytic perspectives on African American identities and the cinema include James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (New York: Dial Press, 1976) and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1982, 1967).

18. This phrase is borrowed from Elizabeth Alexander's essay on the Rodney King videos. It has a somewhat different meaning here, specific to my essay, but I mean to reference her framework of ideas about audience, witnessing, and access. Elizabeth Alexander, "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *The Black Interior* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004), 175–205.

19. Taylor, "Paradox of Black Independent Cinema," in Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, 438.

20. Ibid., 440.

21. Ibid., 441.

22. David Nicholson, "Which Way the Black Film Movement?" in Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, 443.

23. Ibid.

24. Here Taylor refers to his viewing of the film's trailer, not the completed film. He goes on to say that the trailer did not make him want to see the film. Nicholson, "Black Film Movement," in Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, 446.

25. Ibid., 444.

26. Zeinabu irene Davis, "The Future of Black Film," in Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, 450.

27. Ibid., 452.

28. Audrey T. McCluskey, "Troubling the Waters: A Conversation with Manthia Diawara," in *Black Camera* (Spring/Summer 2006): 10.

29. Ralph Ellison, quoted in "The Blues," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Nellie McKay and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 23.

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30. Warrington Hudlin, transcript of interview with Phyllis Klotman, collection of the Black Film Center/Archive.

31. Larry Clark, interview with Phyllis Klotman, video, collection of the Black Film Center/Archive.

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## Television and the Civil Rights Era

*Aniko Bodroghkozy*

“The Negro revolution of the 1960s could not have occurred without the television coverage that brought it to almost every home in the land.”<sup>1</sup> This observation from a producer of CBS News in 1965 might suggest that American television was awash with images of African Americans during the Civil Rights era. And it was—but it also was not. Television during this period adopted a strangely schizophrenic attitude to African Americans: their plight and struggles received voluminous attention in news, documentary, and special reports. In prime-time entertainment programming, however, American audiences saw a mostly whitewashed world, with the dramas and sitcoms of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s rarely featuring non-white characters. What role did network television play during the tumultuous and profoundly transformational years of the Civil Rights revolution in American race relations?

It is convenient to date the beginning of the Civil Rights era to the 1954 landmark Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned legal school segregation. The *Brown* decision brought sustained national focus to the situation of African Americans, particularly in the Jim Crow South, and inaugurated a ten-year period of increased activism, mass movement, heightened national consciousness, and media attention to the question of American race relations and the place of African Americans in American society. The era culminated with the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, respectively, which removed many of the major legal barriers to black equality and democratic participation. The Civil Rights era is also largely notable for the way that mostly poor, otherwise disempowered African Americans, primarily in the Deep South, used nonviolent direct action protests and demonstrations to first grab the attention of the entire country and then force the federal government to act. Civil Rights and, increasingly, more confrontational Black Power activism continued after the passage of these landmark pieces of legislation, but the attention increasingly turned North as the issues became more

complicated and increasingly uncomfortable for whites outside the Deep South.

Network television achieved full national penetration just as the Civil Rights era was getting under way. Until 1953 much of the South and most rural areas of the country did not have access to network television programming because of an FCC-mandated freeze (while technical matters were decided) on the issuance of new broadcasting licenses. Only in the mid 1950s did these areas finally get hooked up to the major national networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC. The linking up of the South, especially the Deep South, to the network grid presented major problems for New York-based network programmers and executives as the Civil Rights revolution gained force. How would the networks put together programming—both entertainment and information—that would attract a national audience but offend the sensibilities of as few members of that audience as possible?

The controversy generated by one entertainment program of this era that engaged with questions of race provided the networks with a good excuse to avoid dealing with images of African Americans for years to come. *Amos 'n' Andy* had been a hugely popular radio series since the late 1920s, near the dawn of radio as a commercial entertainment medium. Created and starring two white performers, Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, the series focused on the misadventures and verbal malapropisms of two black Southern migrants to Harlem who ran a dilapidated taxi company. The comedy of the series focused largely on the blackface minstrelsy of Gosden and Correll, who spoke a white-imagined black dialect. With the coming of network television, many series and performers that had been popular on radio began migrating to the new medium. How would *Amos 'n' Andy* make the move? Because television was seen as a medium that emphasized “realism,” presenting the aging Gosden and Correll in burned cork seemed unwise and also an anachronistic throwback to another era that was thoroughly out of keeping with the modernism that the new medium appeared to herald. The team launched a highly publicized, extended search for black actors to take on the roles. Joining CBS in 1951 as the first-ever all-black nationally broadcast television series, the program quickly became a lightning rod for controversy and protest. Just before the series began airing, the NAACP, at its national convention, passed a resolution condemning the show for its use of negative stereotypes and followed that resolution with a legal suit against CBS—charging the network with “strengthening the conclusion among uninformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest.” It charged that all Negro characters were either clowns or crooks, that Negro professionals such as doctors or lawyers were shown to be “quacks and thieves,” “ignorant of their profession and without ethics.” Negro women were portrayed as “cackling, screaming shrews.”<sup>2</sup>

The vehemence of the NAACP's protest came in part because, at the dawn of television, many in the African American community held high hopes for this new medium. In 1950, noting the frequency with which performers such as Ethel Waters, Josh White, Pearl Bailey, and Billy Eckstine appeared on television screens, an *Ebony* magazine article enthused, "television is free of racial barriers. Negro footlight favorites are cast in every conceivable type of television act—musical, dramatic, comedy. Yet rarely have they had to stoop to the Uncle Tom pattern which is usually the Negro thespian's lot on radio shows and in Hollywood movies."<sup>3</sup> To some extent, television in its earliest days had provided more dignified and diverse representations of African Americans. In the early 1950s, NBC-TV pursued an "integration without identification" policy of including black actors in a variety of roles without calling attention to their race. The network's head of standards and practices also aggressively worked to weed out racially offensive material in programming. For instance, in 1954 Eddie Cantor was refused permission to sing in blackface.<sup>4</sup>

However, the protests over *Amos 'n' Andy*, along with the inclusion of the Deep South onto the network web, created too many economic complications for the networks. Segregationists objected to seeing black actors mingling with whites; integrationists objected to demeaning minstrel-like stereotypes. Advertisers, who ultimately paid the bills, disliked any controversy that was likely to turn away potential audiences. By the mid 1950s, prime-time television had become a very white world.

If entertainment programming was just too problematic for black representations, the situation was very different in the nascent news arena. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the network news divisions were still learning how to do journalism in the medium of television. Until the fall of 1963, CBS and NBC devoted only fifteen minutes to their nightly news programs. Covering breaking news and providing on-the-spot reporting was a cumbersome endeavor. News cameras were large, unwieldy pieces of technology. In order to record sync sound, a camera operator needed the assistance of a sound person, whose recording equipment was connected to the camera by a sort of umbilical cord. Unlike a print journalist, who could report with only a pad of paper and pencil, a television journalist required a one or two person film crew. If the reporter was covering an event after dark, powerful lights were also required. During the Civil Rights era, the sheer visibility of television news reporters and their technology frequently posed dilemmas for these journalists. At times, television reporters and cameramen found themselves part of the news story as angry segregationists vented their fury on cameras and those wielding them.

The Little Rock school integration crisis of 1957 served as one of the first major, ongoing stories covered by television news. The crisis and its

coverage by television revealed both the medium's inexperience in journalism with moving pictures, but also how uniquely powerful this new form of journalism could be in bringing the Civil Rights story to a national audience. Governor Orval Faubus had called out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration of Central High by a group of nine black students. On the day that the students were to arrive, a large and ugly mob of segregationists had gathered in front of the school. Student Elizabeth Eckford arrived alone, to be met by the mob and by a large contingent of journalists. Among those journalists were reporters from CBS and NBC, both with sound camera crews. As the frightened, but stoic and dignified, fifteen year-old faced the racial epithets hurled at her, the print, wire, magazine, and television reporters recorded the confrontation. Unfortunately, the CBS reporter did not get his camera crew into place in time. In an indication of the medium's raw inexperience with newsgathering, the reporter urged the now-quiet mob to "yell again" as his camera began filming. The reporter then proceeded to stick his microphone and camera in the face of the petrified Eckford and ask her questions. The frozen girl merely looked forward, too frightened to speak.<sup>5</sup> As the reporter later noted, having come from print journalism, he originally approached his television journalism the same way as working in print. Obviously, television news required different approaches, sensibilities, and ethical considerations. The reporter noted in retrospect, "The whole process of changing television into a serious news medium happened to coincide with the civil rights movement."<sup>6</sup>

The Little Rock showdown received extensive coverage in the network's fifteen-minute evening news programs and also in special report bulletins that broke into regularly scheduled programming. In many ways, it was a perfect story for this visual medium: the confrontation between the lone black Eckford and the vicious white mob made for provocative pictures that conveyed a moral drama that was simple to understand. And, over the span of about one month, this drama was played to a vast audience that no other journalistic medium could reach so widely and so instantly. The sheer visuality of television news was also key to its power in presenting the Civil Rights story. As media scholar Sasha Torres has pointed out, "on the one hand, race and racial conflict fed the new medium's enormous appetite for visual spectacle; on the other, the mere fact of television's coverage served paradoxically to render racism visible in new ways, and to new audiences."<sup>7</sup>

The Civil Rights Movement quickly became television news' most important ongoing domestic story. In 1962 another school desegregation story exploded into America's living rooms via television: this time the battleground was at the University of Mississippi at Oxford, when James Meredith attempted to enroll as the first African American to attend the state's flagship campus. By this time, television newsgathering had matured considerably, and during the week-long crisis of rioting on the campus and political



grandstanding by Governor Ross Barnett, the three networks sent dozens of personnel to the Magnolia state to provide saturation coverage. NBC even preempted the debut of a new sitcom for the new season in order to carry a prime-time special about the crisis.<sup>8</sup> CBS correspondent Dan Rather provided much of his network's reporting, and his visibility in Oxford helped make him a television news star. The Civil Rights beat served as a career-making assignment for a significant number of broadcast journalists. The Meredith story, like Little Rock, was perfect for television in that it provided the heightened visibility of racism and the moral clarity of opposing forces clashing in a highly dramatic manner. The Meredith story also displayed characteristics that recur in much television news coverage of the period. The focus was on an individualized black "worthy victim." Even though much of what was significant about the Civil Rights revolution involved mass movement and nonviolent, direct action protests and demonstrations, network news coverage was most comfortable focusing on individuals to personify the larger, more abstract, and complex issues. Meredith received mostly sympathetic coverage, in part because he was not connected to a movement. In one news special, Dan Rather pointedly asked Meredith whether he was a "tool" of the NAACP. Meredith emphatically denied connection to the organization, beyond accepting their legal assistance.<sup>9</sup> Except for occasional interviews, however, Meredith was usually shown mute. Typically, black "worthy victims" of segregation or disenfranchisement were either shown silent and disempowered or, for those allowed to speak, remarkably articulate, educated, poised, and middle class in demeanor. A documentary special on Mississippi voting discrimination presented viewers with a disenfranchised black Mississippian. He was a high school teacher in a segregated school, but the report described him as completing his graduate degree at Cornell University and as a member of the National Science Foundation. However, he had been deemed by the local registrar as illiterate and thus not eligible to register.<sup>10</sup>

Portraying Southern whites presented other dilemmas. Most segregationists viewed reporters from outside the region with suspicion and hostility. Particular anger was directed at television newsmen, who were far more visible than print reporters. NBC correspondent Richard Valeriani was famously clubbed while covering the 1965 Selma campaign for voting rights. He reported the next day—from his hospital bed, with his head bandaged and his voice slurred.<sup>11</sup> Although many of the most significant journalists, both print and broadcast, who covered the Civil Rights Movement were from the South themselves—Texan Dan Rather, Louisiana-native Howard K. Smith in television news, Georgian Claude Sitton for the *New York Times*—Southern whites tended to view the national press as a Northern invasion, bent on facilitating the destruction of the Southern "way of life." Television reporters were caught in a bind. Few national press reporters were terribly

sympathetic to the segregationist cause, especially when it advocated defying federal law; however, network news broadcasting had to abide by the "Fairness Doctrine," an FCC regulation (revoked during the Reagan Administration in 1987) that required broadcasters, in their coverage of controversial issues, to present viewers with opposing viewpoints. Although the Doctrine appeared to mandate standard, professional, journalistic protocol, television journalists found the regulation frustrating and limiting to their journalistic judgments. CBS's Washington bureau chief questioned the issue of balance and the decision as to who the reporter put on the air to represent Southern whites: Should it be the head of the White Citizens' Council? Should it be the mayor? "Frequently, you wind up with the most belligerent white leader around; the others refuse to comment."<sup>12</sup> Network news, however, tended to minimize and marginalize the appearance and discourses of staunch segregationists. The networks went out of their way to search for Southern white moderates to put on the air.

Oxford, Mississippi, during the Meredith crisis, was probably the last place to find white Southern moderates: the town and the university had been thoroughly convulsed by violent mobs of whites; both locals and non-locals, students and nonstudents, inspired to some extent by Governor Barnett's incendiary remarks, had turned the area into a war zone. Eventually two people lay dead, including a French reporter. However, in special news reports, both CBS and NBC managed to find the same white moderate to interview, speaking a discourse of law and order.<sup>13</sup> Both networks presented viewers with a University of Mississippi Episcopal minister, who spoke of the need to respect the law and to admit Meredith. Also interviewed were "Ole Miss" students who echoed the minister's words. The vast majority of students would not have agreed, and significant numbers participated in rioting; however, the news specials marginalized these political actors as deviant, minimized or silenced their discourse in interviews, and held up the white voices of moderation, respect for the law, and acceptance for integration, even if that acceptance was grudging.

If national network news reporting on civil rights tended to provide little comfort to strict segregationists and racists, those who owned and controlled local stations affiliated with the networks fought back by refusing to air the programming. The "blacking out" of news programs and even entertainment shows featuring African American talent was commonplace, but nowhere was the practice more egregious than at WLBT-TV in Jackson, Mississippi. The NBC affiliate refused to air any programming that referred to racial integration; its station manager was a prominent member of the local White Citizens' Council. The station, along with numerous others in the South, regularly broadcast a fifteen-minute public affairs talk show that was produced by the Citizens' Council. With its overriding concerns for "racial integrity," states rights, and the threat of communism, the program

was little more than a propaganda vehicle for white supremacists.<sup>14</sup> Medgar Evers, head of the Mississippi NAACP, attempted to get WLBT's license revoked because of its flagrant flouting of the Fairness Doctrine. The station also repeatedly refused to allow Evers to appear on the air to rebut defamatory statements and representations that had been broadcast about him. Finally, in 1963 shortly before Evers was murdered by racist Byron de la Beckwith, the station relented and allowed Evers airtime. According to broadcast historian Steven Classen, "many Mississippians heard the NAACP leader speak in his own voice for the first time. White segregationists who had never allowed 'Negroes' in their living rooms watched an articulate black Mississippian come into their homes in a direct address."<sup>15</sup> Although Evers and the NAACP were not successful in persuading the FCC to revoke the station's license, in 1969, after years of petitioning by the United Church of Christ, representing local viewers, the U.S. Court of Appeals finally revoked the license of the station's owners. A bi-racial committee ran the station for a number of years before the license was awarded in 1979 to a local Jackson group that was headed by Civil Rights veteran Aaron Henry. WLBT-TV became one of only two television stations to have ever had its license revoked in the history of U.S. broadcasting. The prolonged struggle over WLBT indicated just how important television, both national and local, was to the Civil Rights Movement and also how fiercely segregationists fought to use local television to blunt the representations of racial change emanating from their parent networks.

The Civil Rights Movement achieved one of its greatest moments—and its most significant television moment—when all three networks preempted programming, on August 28, 1963, to carry live the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Never before had the networks devoted so much time, effort, manpower, technology, and forfeited advertising revenue to such an event. Only presidential nominating conventions and inaugurations came close. The three networks agreed to pool their radio and television coverage: twenty-two cameras provided pooled footage—from the Washington Monument, where marchers congregated; from the parade route; and from the Lincoln Memorial, where the speeches and musical performances occurred.<sup>16</sup> The networks employed more than 400 of their Washington-based personnel and brought up hundreds more New York-based employees. Washington D.C. police were inundated with requests for press passes: beyond the 1,200 passes already accredited for the year, 1,900 extra ones were issued, more passes than had ever been received for one event.<sup>17</sup> Along with the pooled camera positions, each of the networks had its own exclusive cameras, approximately forty-nine in all for the three networks. Besides CBS, NBC, and ABC, Canada's CBC, the BBC in England, and television film crews from Japan, France, and West Germany were on hand to cover the March. The brand new Telstar communication

satellite beamed live coverage to Europe. Most communist countries in Europe and the Soviet Union taped the program. Much was made of the fact that Russia decided not to broadcast the event live.

Network coverage of the March emphasized the dignity, purposefulness, and peacefulness of the 250,000 marchers, although news commentators frequently questioned to what extent the March would have any impact on members of Congress who were deliberating the Kennedy Administration's Civil Rights Bill. The assumption behind such journalistic framing was that demonstrations, even grand ones such as the March on Washington, were inappropriate vehicles for influencing legislation. CBS's Robert Pierpoint, in a report from Capitol Hill immediately after the March, told viewers that almost all in Congress "agreed on one essential point: the March itself would not influence many, if any, Congressmen's votes. Only the reaction of the voters at home to the March would do that—and they have yet to be heard from."<sup>18</sup> This comment threw the onus onto television viewers to examine their own responses and do the appropriate thing; and that did not mean to join the Movement and get personally involved in protest activity and direct action, but rather to contact their Congressmen and urge them to vote appropriately. CBS News found itself in a strangely contradictory position. All of its news decisions suggested that the March had enormous political implications, yet, when correspondents engaged it on the familiar turf of the legislative battleground, they insisted on asserting more conservative notions of how democracy functions—and mass movements, demonstrations, and marching in the streets had no obvious place in the equation. This stance merely reiterated the often standard approach taken by news reporters: discomfort and unease with mass protest, even when such activism was thoroughly nonviolent and dignified and even as the imagery provided by protest and demonstrations made for thrilling television. News reporters remained uneasy when confronted with masses of mostly black bodies in purposeful movement.

In the aftermath of the March on Washington, the *New York Times*' influential television critic Jack Gould observed, "If the Negro for years has suffered one dominant handicap it has been in communicating and dramatizing his lot. Not to the integrationists, not to the unyieldingly prejudiced, but the indifferent white millions for whom integration or segregation was of scant personal concern. The sociologist of tomorrow may find that it was television more than anything else that finally penetrated this huge camp of the uncommitted."<sup>19</sup> The African American press also noted the significance of television coverage of the March: the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the highest circulation, nationally distributed newsweekly of the black press, was particularly enthusiastic about the way that television had represented the event. In an editorial published shortly after the March, the *Courier* noted,

And lest we forget . . . a BIG BOW in the direction of the radio and television industry. Theirs was truly a job for the ages. Knowing that the eyes of the civilized world were on them, they gave the entire day a dignity in keeping with the serious solemnity of the affair itself.

They could have “panned” shots which could have been embarrassing to the people who conceived the march . . . and to the nation itself. But time and again they pin-pointed the raw drama, the stark reality of the affair.

They “caught” in all its magnificence the intense and poignant expressions of those for whom the march meant so much. They could have done otherwise . . . but didn’t.

America and the American Negro was projected in a light which will forever remain as a credit to our country.<sup>20</sup>

The March was, in many ways, the Civil Rights Movement’s television apotheosis. Except for framing devices such as Pierpoint’s, the networks turned over significant amounts of network time to the Movement and its speakers to address the American viewing public directly that day. And large numbers of viewers tuned in, providing CBS, which preempted all of its afternoon programming to carry the March’s speeches live, with a Nielsen’s rating victory.<sup>21</sup> Late-afternoon viewers saw and heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his soon-to-be-famous “I have a dream” speech. The speech was a revelation to most viewers: few Americans outside the Movement had ever heard King speak in his preacher mode before. King typically appeared on television as a political leader, not as a clergyman. However, when CBS put together its prime-time news special about the March that evening, the news team didn’t quite know what to do with the “I have a dream” speech. The news special instead presented viewers with the now largely forgotten first part of King’s address. The first part of the speech used the more familiar discourse of politics and legislation; it addressed the need to alleviate black suffering. The prophetic, visionary, biblical oratory of “I have a dream” was quite unfamiliar to news analysts in 1963—and to white audiences.

As if the saturation coverage given to the March on Washington weren’t enough, one week later, on Labor Day, NBC wiped out an entire evening of prime-time programming to present viewers with a three-hour special documentary report on the history and current state of race relations and the plight of African Americans, *The American Revolution of ’63*. ABC, likewise, ran a highly touted five-part series on the same set of concerns, *Crucial Summer*, throughout August and September.

Even as the news divisions devoted copious amounts of time to Civil Rights, by the beginning of the new season of entertainment programming in the fall of 1963, viewers were beginning to see a less whitewashed world in prime-time television. Responding to Kennedy-era idealism, the

networks in the early 1960s began airing a cycle of programming that television historian Mary Ann Watson has labeled “New Frontier character dramas.” Watson describes them as “programs based on liberal social themes in which the protagonists were professionals in service to society.”<sup>22</sup> By the fall of 1963, the teachers, lawyers, doctors, and social workers who were the heroes of these shows began to turn their attention to the problem of race relations and the plight of African Americans. Although the networks were still anxious about alienating Southern white audiences, by 1963 the twin force of the Civil Rights Movement and the now fully committed Kennedy Administration managed to convince the networks that they could no longer afford to ignore what was fast becoming the nation’s number one domestic sociopolitical preoccupation. Also, as Sasha Torres has pointed out, the networks, as they achieved total national penetration, fundamentally needed a “national audience” that shared general ideological norms and values.<sup>23</sup> Regionally distinct audiences with sectional tastes and values around significant social questions such as race presented problems for the creators of mass-marketed popular culture. The networks needed to be able to offer up to advertisers an undifferentiated bulk audience, with programming that offended the fewest and pleased the majority. The networks had originally catered to the “peculiarities” of the “Southern way of life” by pretending that African Americans did not exist, except in rare instances as maids and servants. However, that approach became increasingly untenable as the Civil Rights revolution gathered momentum through the early 1960s. A newly vigilant FCC—under Kennedy-appointed Newton Minow, who famously described prime-time television as a “vast wasteland” in 1961 and dared to threaten license revocation if stations and networks did not pay more attention to the public interest—also encouraged the networks to rethink prime-time television. In July 1963 CBS instructed program producers and creators that “Negroes should be adequately and accurately” portrayed. And, according to Watson, “The New York Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences reminded its membership of their responsibility to ‘reflect the realities of the American scene by employing and truthfully representing all facets of our population . . . this applies especially to the Negro.’”<sup>24</sup>

One of the more notable “New Frontier character dramas” was *East Side/West Side*.<sup>25</sup> Although it ran for only one year, the series produced a number of episodes on race issues that garnered enormous amounts of attention. The drama focused on the cases taken by a crusading New York social worker, Neil Brock (George C. Scott), who grappled on a weekly basis with the vicissitudes of urban poverty and social neglect. He was aided by an African American assistant, played by Cicely Tyson, one of the first continuing roles for a black actor in early 1960s programming. One harrowing episode explored appalling ghetto living conditions in Harlem

and focused on a young black couple with a small baby. Joe, played by James Earl Jones, is frustrated and angry because he can't get a decent job, even after taking night courses. His more optimistic wife, Ruth, played by Diana Sands, supports the family as a waitress. Crisis strikes when a rat bites their sleeping baby in their dilapidated tenement. In a nightmarish scene, Joe runs out into the dark Harlem streets clutching his child, unable to get any taxi to stop and take them to a hospital. When the baby dies, Ruth collapses emotionally, losing all sense of hope. Brock and the Cicely Tyson character attempt to offer assistance to Joe and Ruth at the hospital. In a much quoted line of dialogue, Joe exclaims, "If a white man stick a knife in my back and another white man pull it out and stick on a bandage, you think I'm going to kiss his hand?" Television critics around the country wrote about the show and it received strong ratings. However, two Southern affiliates of CBS, one in Shreveport, Louisiana, and the other in Atlanta, Georgia, refused to air the episode. The general manager of WAGA-TV in Atlanta explained that "it would be detrimental to the cause of good race relations in Atlanta and surrounding areas."<sup>26</sup> This was a curious statement, considering that the episode had nothing to do with ghetto living conditions in the Southern city. The blacking out of the episode pointed to the networks' continuing dilemma in producing programming that dealt with socially relevant material about race that was palatable to mass audiences.

The moral Manicheanism of this episode was clear. Joe and Ruth were the worthy black victims of an unjust racial caste system that kept them abject. Numerous white viewers responded to the episode with statements of white liberal guilt. Viewers wrote to the show's producers asking how they could help; others vented their sense of helplessness and responsibility. One viewer from Brooklyn wrote, "We were moved to write to you because in our sense of helplessness over the dramatic situation presented, this was the only positive step we, as viewers, could take."<sup>27</sup>

Another *East Side/West Side* episode on race relations did not make the moral equation quite so clear for viewers. The episode explored the conundrum of a liberal couple in the middle to upper middle-class suburbs of New York facing the threat of "blockbusting"—an unscrupulous tactic used by real estate agents: neighborhoods with one or two black families were panicked by real estate agents who encouraged whites to sell their houses at below-market rates with visions of a black invasion. The agents then turned around and sold those houses to unwitting black families who were eager to move into a nice suburban neighborhood. At the end of the process, a previously mostly white neighborhood was mostly black. Neil Brock's friend Chuck and his Southern wife Anne (portrayed somewhat mechanically as the exact opposite of a bigoted segregationist) find themselves with new neighbors who are black. On

Brock's advice, they agree to host a party to introduce the well-spoken, educated black couple—who display all the signifiers of middle-class respectability—to their panicky white neighbors. Racial rapprochement appears possible until one of the homes is sold to a financially successful but uneducated and unrefined black man. The narrative hinges on what decision Chuck makes. Anne, the color-blind Southerner, wants to stay and fight the good fight. Interestingly, the narrative does not come to closure. The viewer doesn't know whether or not Chuck will participate in the white flight or not.

The episode is noteworthy for the way in which it puts white Northern racism under the magnifying glass. There are no black worthy victims to feel sorry for; rather, the episode asks the (presumably) mostly white audience to identify with Chuck and to examine their own conscience. Because of the narrative's lack of closure, many viewers who wrote to the show's producers did just that—and not all came to the color-blind, integrationist conclusions that a preferred reading of the narrative might suggest.<sup>28</sup>

Programs such as *East Side/West Side*, which often made viewers feel uncomfortable about race relations and forced whites to confront questions of difference, tended not to be ratings winners. The networks' successful strategy for "integrating" prime-time television involved a more color-blind approach. In 1965 NBC hit pay dirt with *I Spy*. The series, playing to Cold War preoccupations, featured a pair of U.S. espionage agents who battled communist foes around the world. Robert Culp played the white agent, who masqueraded as a professional tennis player; Bill Cosby played the black agent, who masqueraded as Culp's trainer. The pair were equals in their spying work, Cosby's Alexander Scott being in no way subservient to Culp's Kelly Robinson. Scott was debonair, accomplished, occasionally romantically inclined, a comfortable world traveler. J. Fred MacDonald, in his history of blacks in American television, praises *I Spy* and the characterization of Cosby's Scott, noting, "it was an educational experience to see an African-American hero operating constructively abroad in the service of the United States. Cosby's character was always equal to his encounters with foreign agents, heads of state, beautiful women, and would-be murderers."<sup>29</sup> Alexander Scott was both the opposite of *Amos 'n' Andy* and the opposite of the black worthy victim. Both the stereotyped minstrel figure and the figure of pity and abjection could make viewers uncomfortable by reminding them of white racism. Scott did not. A university graduate, Rhodes scholar, linguistic genius fluent in eleven languages, Alexander Scott was, like Sidney Poitier in Hollywood cinema of the same period, a "super Negro." In order to avoid the demeaning stereotypes of the past, *I Spy* presented television audiences with a representation of blackness that was so superior and so accomplished that it could not possibly offend anyone—except diehard racists, who the networks and their



advertisers were less and less concerned about placating. However, these “super Negroes” were no more “realistic” than the Andys, Kingfishes, and Sapphires of old. But, within the context of integrationist civil rights struggle, Alexander Scott was a particularly pleasing and comforting figure: he could make white Americans feel good and politically progressive about welcoming a black man into their living rooms.

*I Spy* also paired its civil rights concerns with Cold War politics. A prevailing anxiety during this period concerned the foreign policy implications of U.S. segregation, voting discrimination, and Jim Crow Southern culture. With the United States positioning itself as the leader of the “Free World” against the Soviet Union-controlled “captive nations,” U.S. moral and ideological leadership was compromised by its racial caste system. This was particularly problematical with the newly decolonizing nations on the

**Bill Cosby (as Alexander Scott) and Robert Culp (as Kelly Robinson) in *I Spy*, 1965–1968.**



NBC/Photofest

African continent, which, it was feared, could easily fall under communist domination. *I Spy* provided a perfect response to those anxieties. It placed its black and white spies in foreign locales where, as television historian Mary Beth Haralovich notes, they “represent racial harmony both in their relationship and in dialogue with Communists. Robinson and Scott occupy the discursive role the State Department searched for in the 1950s: African Americans who would travel overseas and say ‘the right thing’ about race relations in the United States.”<sup>30</sup>

While Robinson and Scott were traversing the globe, telling the good news about racial progress in the United States, on Sunday night, March 7, 1965, television told a very different story from Selma, Alabama. ABC-TV had been broadcasting a much anticipated television premier of the acclaimed Hollywood film, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, about Nazi crimes during the Holocaust, so the network commanded a large audience that night. In the middle of the film, the network cut in with news footage of carnage at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which led out of Selma to the Alabama capitol, Montgomery, fifty miles down the road. Civil Rights activists had been preparing to march on Montgomery to protest the inability of black residents in Selma, the surrounding Dallas County, and most of Alabama to register to vote. The nonviolent group had lined up and faced a phalanx of police on horseback and Alabama state troopers who were equipped with gas masks. Television viewers, who, moments ago, had been watching fictionalized Nazis, suddenly found themselves watching what looked like homegrown real ones, beating and trampling a victimized minority. Television film crews had been shunted off to the sides of the confrontation, but the images of wafting tear gas, charging horses, and downed marchers, along with the sounds of screams, made for horrifying but compelling television news.

The showdown on the Pettus Bridge, thereafter often referred to as “Bloody Sunday,” did not come out of nowhere, however. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had specifically chosen Selma as the site for a campaign to highlight the lack of black voting rights in Alabama and the need for federal voting rights legislation. Joseph Smitherman, who was the youthful mayor of the city in 1965, talked about the campaign for the noted PBS documentary history on the Civil Rights Movement, *Eyes on the Prize*. “They picked Selma just like a movie producer would pick a set. You had the right ingredients.”<sup>31</sup> The right ingredients included an openly racist county sheriff with a short temper, Jim Clark. Clark was similar to Birmingham’s Bull Connor, who had sicced police dogs and turned high power fire hoses onto demonstrators in that Alabama city in 1963. King and the SCLC had used Birmingham to draw press attention to the injustices of public segregation. The campaign in that city had become a flashpoint of media attention because of the

brutal treatment accorded nonviolent demonstrators. Birmingham achieved the kind of moral clarity and good versus evil polarization that works best on television news when King decided to allow black school-children to demonstrate and get carted off to jail by Connor's police. The Birmingham and Selma campaigns were both premised on the necessity of drawing media coverage, especially national television coverage. As NBC's Washington bureau chief noted in 1965, "Negroes are the architects, bricklayers, carpenters, and welders of this revolution. Television is their chosen instrument."<sup>32</sup> King and the SCLC, in particular, were remarkably media-savvy and clearly recognized that, in order to influence the federal government into passing civil rights legislation to overturn Jim Crow statutes fully and to ensure black political enfranchisement, the Movement needed to attract the sympathetic and outraged attention of a national audience. Network television coverage provided the best access to that audience. As King noted in a speech following "Bloody Sunday," "we will no longer let them use their clubs on us in dark corners. We are going to make them do it in the glaring light of television." Some criticized SCLC for stage-managing confrontations and requiring violence from others as part of its publicity script. Others argued, however, that campaigns such as Selma and Birmingham merely turned television lights onto situations that were already going on but had been hidden from national view; television coverage just helped intensify them.

Confrontations between black demonstrators and Sheriff Clark had been going on for over a month before that Sunday. Night after night, television news audiences saw stories from the Dallas County courthouse as would-be black registrants lined up to become eligible voters. Brown's Chapel, the black church from which demonstrators and marchers embarked, became a familiar landmark to viewers. Sasha Torres has argued that, with respect to Selma, SCLC's political culture had become saturated with "drama" as a key value for the organization. A confrontation between Sheriff Clark and Rev. C. T. Vivian, an SCLC leader, perfectly exemplified this "drama" and the way in which, as Torres points out, television news crews functioned not merely as observers, but as "players."<sup>33</sup> On the steps of the courthouse, Vivian baited Clark about his refusal to allow the waiting registrants to enter the building to get out of the rain. Comparing Clark and his deputies to Nazis, Vivian encouraged news reporters to witness the exchange. As television news crews approached and turned on their lights, Clark turned his attention away from Vivian and to the camera, yelling, "Turn out that light or I'll shoot it out!"<sup>34</sup> Clark proceeded to smash Vivian in the mouth, in full view of the cameras, and then went after the cameras. Vivian in turn played to the cameras with blood on his mouth, declaring of Clark, "We're willing to be beaten for democracy, and yet you misuse democracy in these streets!"<sup>35</sup> Vivian understood the power of the

television image and how the confrontation played to national audiences. Clark, with only dumb, brute force, had no media savvy whatsoever and clearly had no understanding about how to negotiate with the medium to construct images that would have been less damaging to his cause.

Three years earlier, in 1962, another sheriff, Laurie Pritchett of Albany, Georgia, had done a much savvier job when SCLC tried to stage a campaign in his fully and brutally segregated town. Pritchett refused to be goaded by demonstrators and refused to go along with the SCLC media script by playing the role of the brutal, openly racist Southern lawman, even though, outside camera range, he was unrepentantly segregationist. SCLC and the Albany Movement—despite months of protests, civil disobedience, jailings, and mass marches—were never able to crack the white segregationist wall that they faced. And, in large part because there was no chaos, such as had been the case in Oxford, Mississippi, the Kennedy Administration never felt compelled to intervene. The news media also quickly lost interest. By the end of the summer, King and SCLC left Albany in defeat.

Selma was to be very different, in part because players played their roles correctly. And in the immediate aftermath of the broadcasting of “Bloody Sunday,” a remarkable pilgrimage of outraged viewers began boarding planes, trains, and buses to Selma. An article published in *The Nation* describes one couple’s agonized response to the coverage: “We were in our living room in San Francisco watching the 6 P.M. news. I was not aware that at the same moment people all up and down the West Coast were feeling what my wife and I felt; that at various times all over the country that day and up past 11 P.M. Pacific Time that night hundreds of these people would drop whatever they were doing [and head for Selma to place] themselves alongside the Negroes they had watched on television.”<sup>36</sup> Another article observed, “Were it not for this accident of programming [televising footage during *Judgment at Nuremberg*], Selma, Alabama might just have been news, but never history. The pictures from Selma were unpleasant; the juxtaposition of the Nazi storm troopers and the Alabama State Troopers made them unbearable.”<sup>37</sup> One week later, to an enormous television audience, President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed both Houses of Congress about his proposal for a voting rights act and ended his speech with the Movement’s most stirring and famous phrase: “We shall overcome.” The following Sunday, with Martin Luther King in the lead, the now unimpeded march to Montgomery began, with saturation media coverage. The networks provided live coverage when the marchers reached the Montgomery Capitol building on Thursday, March 25. Less than five months later, President Johnson signed into law the landmark Voting Rights Act. The television coverage of the Selma campaign—and especially the outraged national response to “Bloody Sunday”—certainly contributed

significantly to the remarkable speed with which that bill moved through the legislative process.

The Selma campaign is considered by many historians to mark the end of the nonviolent campaign for civil rights focusing on the U.S. South. Media attention moved North and West, beginning in the summer of 1965, with the inner city uprisings in Watts, an economically struggling section of Los Angeles. Over the next four years, television viewers repeatedly saw images of big city ghetto neighborhoods going up in flames as some of the residents of those ghettos erupted in rage. Many of these blacks reacted to the lack of economic progress for them—to match the progress in dismantling *de jure* segregation.

Prime-time television during this period began its process of digesting the profound changes inaugurated by the Civil Rights Movement. With the success of *I Spy*, the networks began to integrate their entertainment programming more confidently. By the mid-1960s, prime-time television displayed numerous shows with at least a token black character: *Hogan's Heroes*, *Daktari*, *Mission Impossible*, *Ironside*, and *Star Trek* were among the more successful shows to feature integrated casts in 1965–1967. None of these shows, however, featured an African American character as a lead or, as was the case with Bill Cosby in *I Spy*, as a co-lead.

In the fall of 1968, prime-time television finally welcomed its first series to feature an African American in the starring role since *Amos 'n' Andy*: writer-producer Hal Kanter's *Julia* joined NBC's Tuesday night lineup. The series, a light-hearted comedy featuring Diahann Carroll as a widowed nurse and mother to a six-year-old son, Corey, quickly became both a ratings winner and a flashpoint for controversy around questions of black representation. The year 1968 was a particularly calamitous one for Americans, both black and white. Martin Luther King was assassinated in April, sparking violent uprisings and riots throughout the country. Police clashed with the militant and highly visible Black Panther Party. With the Tet Offensive, the war in Vietnam reached a bloody turning point that shook any remaining confidence about the ability of the United States to prevail, and President Johnson, in short order, informed the nation that he would not run for reelection. Students at the elite Columbia University took over campus buildings, protesting both the university's ties to war research and its racist land grab into Harlem. Robert Kennedy, brother of the slain former president, candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination and a particular favorite for African American voters, was himself assassinated while on the campaign trail.

Into this polarized and tumultuous period, when the country appeared to be coming apart at the seams, prime-time television tried to offer Americans a comforting and soothing image of race relations with *Julia*. Critics quickly lambasted the series for being out of touch with the realities

of black life in America and for not “telling it like it is.” *Time* magazine argued that Julia “would not recognize a ghetto if she stumbled into it, and she is, in every respect save color, a figure in a white milieu.”<sup>38</sup> Influential television critic for the *Saturday Review*, Robert Lewis Shayon, also castigated the show for not focusing on a ghetto setting. He noted that the recently released Kerner Commission report on race relations provided readers with the true situation for blacks in America. According to Shayon, “Negro youth, ‘hustling in the jungle’ of the ‘crime-ridden, violence-prone, and poverty-stricken world’—that’s the real problem, according to the commission report.”<sup>39</sup> *Julia* provided viewers with a fantasy—and a dangerous one at that for critics like Shayon. Julia lived in an apartment building with white neighbors, wore couture fashion likely to be too expensive for a widowed nurse, and worked in an all-white medical clinic. Creator Hal Kanter refused to agree that the show was not “telling it like it is.” He argued that the show would deal with the “humorous aspects of discrimination . . . properly handled . . . without rancour, without inflammation, and without telling their [blacks’] attempts to enjoy the American dream.”<sup>40</sup> The series dealt with issues of discrimination and prejudice on a regular basis in a way that *I Spy* did not. Although both Cosby’s Alexander Scott and Carroll’s Julia were dubbed “white Negroes” for their effortless ability to integrate into the middle-class white world and make themselves “acceptable” to white audiences, *Julia* repeatedly reminded viewers about Julia and Corey’s difference, even as the series quickly closed down any significance to that difference. For instance, when Corey’s soon-to-be best friend, a red-haired white boy named Earl J. Waggedorn, first encountered Corey’s mother, he exclaims excitedly, “Your mother’s colored!” Corey replies, “Of course, I’m colored, too.” “You are?” Earl responds and both boys dissolve into giggles.<sup>41</sup>

Racism and prejudice when portrayed were shown to be problems of unenlightened individuals, not as a systemic or institutional matter. In another episode focusing on the adorable Corey, the boy is invited to a birthday party by a little blond-haired girl whom he has just met. The children are, of course, admirably color-blind. However, when Corey and Julia show up at the girl’s home and meet her mother for the first time, the woman is thoroughly taken aback and flustered by the fact that Corey is black. Later, when Julia comes to pick up her son, the mother uncomfortably attempts to praise the boy (who is shown in a nice suit and displaying impeccable manners) by telling Julia how he “fit in just perfectly” with the other children. Julia’s cool “thank you” indicates both to the mother and to the audience that the mother still has to learn the color blindness that her daughter so effortlessly displays. In another episode, Julia is to meet her boss, the crusty but lovable Dr. Chegley, at a fancy French restaurant. The maître d’ is initially thrilled to see the doctor, but quickly turns frosty

when Julia suddenly appears at Chegley's side. He asks whether Chegley has a reservation, to which Chegley coolly responds yes. "Who made the reservation?" asks the obstructionist maître d'. Chegley replies, "Abraham Lincoln."

But in the world of *Julia*, prejudice cuts both ways. In an episode in which Julia begins dating an attractive black actor, viewers discover that he dislikes whites. When he comes to pick Julia up at her apartment building and encounters one of her white neighbors, he criticizes the building as being "too white." Later he declares, "I don't dig them any more than they dig us." Julia, somewhat coquettishly, informs him that he is "prejudiced." As scholar Christine Acham notes in her discussion of *Julia*, "When the show deals with racism, the transgression is assigned to a character who is an outsider to the peaceful environment in which Julia exists."<sup>42</sup>

The show's white viewers, at least those who wrote to the show's producer, tended to display significant self-consciousness about racial difference. White viewers repeatedly prefaced their letters by acknowledging that they were white. "I am white, but I enjoy watching 'Julia.'" "Our whole family, from great grandmother down to my five-year-old, loved it. We just happen to be Caucasian."<sup>43</sup> This self-consciousness may have been a symptom of the denaturalizing of racial categories. "Whiteness" was suddenly visible to these viewers in a way that it had never been before. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and in the midst of the ascendancy of Black Power politics, *Julia* managed to provide some of its viewers with a space to work through what it meant to be white and what it meant to be black.

Black viewers also wrote to Kanter, but their approaches to the series were markedly different from that of white viewers. Numerous black letter writers "displayed a participatory quality in their engagement with the program. They tended to erase boundaries between themselves and the text. Many . . . asked if they could write episodes or play parts on the show . . . While white viewers offered criticism of the program, only the black viewers took it upon themselves to offer their assistance in improving the show."<sup>44</sup>

Even in a program as seemingly innocuous as *Julia*, the stakes in racial representation were very high. The series ended up satisfying few, beyond white viewers who responded to its implicit celebration of color blindness and the theme of blacks being just like "everyone else"—if everyone else is assumed to be white and middle-class. The extreme self-consciousness of viewers, of the program itself, and of critics over questions about how to portray African Americans suggests just how fraught the symbolic terrain was in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement.

The immediate legacy of the Movement for prime-time television included a flurry of black sitcoms in the early 1970s, many produced by

Norman Lear, the executive producer of the phenomenally successful, socially relevant family comedy *All in the Family*. Shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *What's Happening* all achieved ratings success in this period. With the exception of *The Jeffersons*, all took place in inner city ghettos. However, except for *Good Times*, none grappled seriously or regularly with questions of black poverty, racism, or the dilemmas still faced by African Americans.<sup>45</sup> Television historian J. Fred MacDonald dubs this period as the “age of new minstrelsy.”<sup>46</sup> The most remarkable legacy of Civil Rights in prime-time television was the phenomenon of *Roots*, a miniseries that played on ABC for eight consecutive nights in January 1977. The series traced the history of writer Alex Haley’s family—from his ancestor Kunta Kinte’s capture by slave traders in Gambia, his enslavement in America, through the horrors and trials of slavery by Kinte’s descendants, to their emancipation at the end of the Civil War, and their triumphant move to homesteading in Tennessee. In *Roots*, African American characters were both the heroes and the victims; whites were mostly portrayed as villains, a few of whom, were, at best, conflicted by their participation in the evils of slavery.

ABC executives, nervous that a program such as this would not attract white audiences, made the fateful decision to run the series across one week, hoping to lessen the damage to ratings. The opposite happened. The series generated unprecedented and massive audience interest. By the final night, almost half the U.S. population tuned in. Many critics read the spectacular success of *Roots* and the willingness of white audiences to engage with and confront the anguished history of American race relations as a tangible sign of racial progress in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. Scholar Herman Grey has argued that *Roots* transformed the discourse about slavery in the popular imagination. The series helped implant a concern with Afrocentricity among a new generation of young African Americans, which manifested itself in both rap and hip-hop culture and also in Black Studies. Finally, he argues “with its cultural acknowledgment of black viewers and subjects, the miniseries enabled a temporary but no less powerful transitional space within which to refigure and reconstruct black television representations.”<sup>47</sup>

It is impossible to understand fully or account for the impact of the Civil Rights Movement without exploring the role played by U.S. network television during that period. Whether in news reports and documentary programs or in prime-time entertainment shows, most Americans experienced the Movement and its profound challenges to race relations through television. The medium was neither a neutral player nor an unproblematic supporter. However, within the conflicted space of a commercial industry premised on maximizing audiences and run by whites, American network television functioned as a key cultural



player in circulating and amplifying the “Negro Revolution” of the late 1950s and 1960s.

## NOTES

1. William Peters, “The Visible and Invisible Images,” in *Race and the News Media*, eds. Paul L. Fisher and Ralph L. Lowenstein (New York, Praeger, 1967). Peters was a producer of *CBS Reports*. This anthology documented a 1965 gathering of seventy-five newsmen at the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri to discuss ethical dilemmas arising from television news and its coverage of the Civil Rights movement.

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6. Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution: Television News and American Public Life 1948–1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1992), 4. Donovan and Scherer quote CBS correspondent Robert Schakne from a 1987 Symposium on the Media and the Civil Rights Movement held at the University of Mississippi.

7. Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 17.

8. “Video’s Massive News Week: Riots, Rockets and Baseball,” *Variety* (October 3, 1962), 29.

9. *CBS Eyewitness*: “Color Line on Campus” (CBS, air date January 25, 1963).

10. *CBS Reports*: “Mississippi and the 15th Amendment” (CBS, air date September 26, 1962).

11. Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years 1954–1965* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 265, 270–271.

12. William B. Monroe Jr., “The Chosen Instrument of the Revolution,” *Race and the News Media*, 94.

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14. Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955–1969* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 37–38.

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16. “Radio-TV Get Set for Aug. 28 Rights March,” *Broadcasting* (August 19, 1963), 60.

17. “Big March, Big Coverage,” *Broadcasting* (September 2, 1963), 47.

18. *CBS Reports: The Great March* (CBS, air date August 28, 1963).

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19. Jack Gould, "Television and Civil Rights," *New York Times* (September 8, 1963), X15.
20. "Growing in Stature," *Pittsburgh Courier* (September 14, 1963), 10.
21. In the New York area, daytime viewing was up fifteen percent on August 28 compared to the previous Wednesday. Viewership was most concentrated around noontime: Nielsen calculated it to be sixty-one percent higher than a week earlier. See "Big March, Big Coverage," 48.
22. Mary Ann Watson, *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 43.
23. Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, 23.
24. Watson, *The Expanding Vista*, 58.
25. Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Negotiating Civil Rights in Prime Time: A Production and Reception History of CBS's *East Side/West Side*," in *Television and New Media* 4, no. 3 (August 2003): 257–282.
26. *Ibid.*, 269.
27. *Ibid.*, 271.
28. *Ibid.*, 275.
29. MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 120.
30. Mary Beth Haralovich, "I Spy's Living Postcards: The Geo-Politics of Civil Rights," in *Television, History, and American Culture*, eds. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 102.
31. Transcript of Smitherman interview in Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 272.
32. Monroe, "The Chosen Instrument," 83–84.
33. Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, 32.
34. The footage is included in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* and is also discussed in *ibid.*, 32.
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37. Warren Hinckle and David Welsh, "Five Battles of Selma," *Ramparts* (June 1965), 37; quoted in Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 272, note 1.
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39. Robert Lewis Shayon, "'Julia': Breakthrough or Letdown," *Saturday Review* (April 20, 1968), 49; quoted in Bodroghkozy, "Is This What You Mean," 150.
40. Robert Lewis Shayon, "'Julia' Symposium: An Opportunity Lost," *Saturday Evening Post* (May 25, 1968), 36; quoted in Bodroghkozy, "Is This What You Mean," 151.
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42. Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 121.

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45. See Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Good Times in Race Relations?: CBS’s *Good Times* and the Legacy of Civil Rights in Prime-Time,” in *Screen* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 404–428.

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# Racism and Television

*Victoria E. Johnson*

Although we typically think of racism and television in relation to specific, stereotypical images or representations of African Americans that are negative or absurd, television is made up of much more than its images. If we are to understand the history and significance of racism in relation to television, we must first understand that television is a broad, social institution. When defined as a social institution, television is understood to be a complex site of power and knowledge within U.S. culture. Television, in this sense, is a multifaceted venue of struggle, conflict, and consensus—through and within which different interests are expressed, fought over, and reinforced. These struggles and tensions can take place at a broad, “macropolitical” level, which is the domain of large institutions, networks such as broadcasting’s ABC or cable’s HBO. They are also present at the “micropolitical” level of everyday life: when we struggle over control of the remote, decide between video gaming or watching a favorite program, use television as punishment—as when children who have been grounded are prohibited from viewing—or as reward (e.g., after getting an “A” on a test). That is, we cannot dismiss television for being simple or “just entertainment.” But it is also not all-powerful, monolithic, or beyond our intervention or control.

We begin to understand critically television’s social power and potential productivity when we realize that it is a social institution composed of four elements, each of which always operates in tension and in dialogue with the other.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, U.S. television is made up of industrial concerns (structural and economic components, including stations, networks, advertisers, etc.); regulatory concerns (legislation, regulatory and legal decisions, and federal policies); textual concerns (program and advertising “texts”—what we see and hear when we watch television); and audience concerns (public reception and viewer activism regarding texts, regulation, and industrial practices). So, when we think about racism in television, we need to think beyond important images. We need to consider television within its specific historical context: for example, how are the practices of the 1940s different

from those of the 2000s? In what ways are these practices strikingly unchanged?). We must also think about race and racism in television as it is imagined, occurs, reinforced, or challenged in each of these structuring fields. For example, we might ask how *Girlfriends* (WB, 2000–2006; CW, 2006–2008) meets its network’s economic or profit goals (industry interests) in a particular historical moment when deregulation policies (regulatory interests) have led to multimedia mergers that encourage multicultural program address (economic issues, reflected in textual or sound and image content) when appealing to increasingly narrow, or niche, audiences of African American viewers (the intended audience). This chapter uses key historical examples to illustrate each of these four areas—industry, regulation, text, audience—in relation to African Americans, race, and racism in television.

Racism itself can be understood in two ways. First, as scholars such as Stuart Hall and others have suggested, racism is “overt” in the ways that we most typically think of or mean when we use the term in conversation—as it refers to institutional or individual policies or practices that are out in the open, hostile, or legally allowable. But racism is also “inferential”: unconscious, unquestioned, “invisible,” and, seemingly, “common sense.”<sup>2</sup> We might illustrate these distinctions by thinking about the contrast between the overt hostility and racism of actor Michael Richards’s infamous November 2006 stand-up act in a Los Angeles comedy club, an outburst that was shown across television news outlets and on the Internet. But, during its eight-year prime-time run, the sitcom *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1990–1998) rarely incorporated African American characters into its episodes, in spite of the series’ setting in the heart of Manhattan. Richards’s rant is overt in its racist vitriol and illogic, while *Seinfeld* implied weekly that whiteness reflected the norm of everyday life within the most populous city in the country and that this norm was common sense in the context of a program about “nothing.”

Debates over racism in television have historically coalesced around three key concerns: questions regarding television’s conflicted identity as a medium that serves the public interest but is also organized as a for-profit, market-based medium; debates regarding representation, or the perceived responsiveness and accuracy of programming and advertising images of African Americans; and activism for increased African American visibility, access, and involvement behind the camera, in positions of financial and creative power within the television industry.<sup>3</sup>

## U.S. TELEVISION: PUBLIC SERVICE VERSUS PRIVATE PROFIT?

In the immediate post–World War II context, many African Americans in the United States were enthusiastic about the possibility that the new medium of TV could be a beacon for civil rights. It was hoped that, through

the medium's images, black America might, for the first time, be seen in all of its true diversity and therefore recognized for its critical contributions to the nation. For instance, in 1950, the black press newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, noted in an editorial:

The press, pulpit, and radio have long been noted as the three great molders of public opinion . . . Now comes another addition to this potent trinity of news dissemination—television—probably destined to become the most powerful of them all. Television now both tells and illustrates it—just as it happens and without being ‘doctored’ or ‘slanted.’ As a result, television . . . can easily become America’s greatest foe to bigotry, malice and racial or religious hatred.<sup>4</sup>

This passage, which is representative of much press about television at the time, compares it to a divine presence. Television is also presumed to be more powerful than its combined media predecessors because it uses images as well as sound to communicate to the public. And, even though films of the period could tell about and illustrate African American life and culture, television was perceived to be a more intimate, everyday medium that seemed more truthful than film. Whereas motion pictures were carefully edited long after they were filmed, television was perceived to be less “doctored” and more immediately responsive to issues of the day. Because it was not “intervened with,” television seemed to promise to be a truthful crusader against social injustice and a key weapon in the exposure and elimination of racism and resulting inequities in society.

Television was hailed as the answer to social problems in the post-war era for groups other than African Americans. And yet, arguably, there was no group for whom this hope was more prominent or more pressing than black Americans, who had endured not only slavery, institutionalized racial oppression, and socially and governmentally condoned colonized status within the United States, but also a history of representation in the arts and media that had stereotypically portrayed blacks as inferior in contrast to presumed white cultural norms. The public availability of television coincided with the conclusion of World War II, in which black troops had valiantly fought in the name of the United States. Considering their victory and the exposure of the atrocities of the Holocaust—which were themselves rooted in racism—black veterans and leaders were among the many whose voices promoted hope for a post-war “Double-V,” or double victory for African Americans over Nazism and fascism abroad and racism at home.<sup>5</sup>

Such hopes for television were not unrealistic, considering the medium's definition as an instrument of public service and its real technical capabilities for truly national education and enlightenment. According

to the Communications Act of 1934—whose principles remained intact until the Telecommunications Act of 1996—broadcast television stations were licensed based on their service in the best interests of the public that each served. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was responsible for regulatory oversight of the public interest standard. Those who embraced this idea—that television was essentially a public service medium and educational tool—believed, by extension, that part of television’s mandate was to challenge status-quo ideas and to give voice to underrepresented interests in society so that the broader culture might be exposed to competing ideas and concerns, air those concerns in public, and engage in rational debate that might lead to enlightened awareness and change. This commitment and belief are still present when controversies arise regarding the representation of African American identity within this public forum. And yet, broadcasting was also organized as a for-profit venture, which was subsidized through commercial advertisements and benefited corporations.

Historically, broadcasting—beginning with radio broadcasting—emerged in an era, the 1920s, when big business and market forces were promoted and embraced as acting in the best interest of the public. Additionally, corporate culture was presumed to reward those who produced what the public wanted and who, it was argued, did so with a level of quality control that only big business capital and muscle could provide. Advertising was the language through which the American public was introduced to the era’s reigning ideals regarding corporate culture and the public interest. As it boomed in the 1920s, advertising gave a language and imagery to American desires to conform to a new national ideal, to embrace market or consumer solutions to larger personal and social problems.<sup>6</sup>

Struggles to balance public service and profit-making marked debates about television and its cultural purpose from its inception. Service in the public interest would seem to encourage the transmission of typically unheard voices for a broader, mass national public. As a market-driven medium, however, television often appears to value only the audiences and interests that are the most profitable—generally representing a narrower audience of middle-class and upper middle-class urban professionals who are predominantly white. The literal (market) and symbolic (representational) value of blackness and of African American audiences is often trapped at the center of this paradox.

Until the early 1950s, television remained primarily a local concern. When the United States entered World War II, there were only about 20,000 television sets in use. Half of these were in New York City alone, with most of the others in the urban Northeast and some in Chicago and in Los Angeles. During the war itself, only six existing stations in the country



continued regular broadcast service. By 1948, only 1 percent of the American public actually had a television set, and, although that number had increased to more than 50 percent by 1953, it was not until the early 1960s that more than 90 percent of all U.S. homes had a television set.<sup>7</sup> So, historically, it is important to contextualize early television's images and social power in terms of whose voices were included in decisions about the business of television, its images, and its ideal market.

In the postwar era, television expanded much more rapidly than previous communication technologies had. In part, this was because the key to network power and profitability lay in national distribution. Because the networks distribute programming and advertising nationally, they each reach television households throughout the entire country. The cost of programming is thus spread over the entire national population, so the cost per audience member for each produced program remains fairly low. In addition, the network can charge more for its program's advertising because the advertiser is guaranteed a relatively large, national audience in exchange for its money. In this way, networks are considered cost-effective and profitable because they operate according to an economy of scale—they produce programs relatively cheaply that are distributed across the nation with only a one-time cost of production. Thus, the larger the scale of audience that the broadcast network program reaches, the greater the return on the initial investment is. As the African American market itself became more profitable, reflecting increases in standard of living, educational opportunities, and migration throughout the country in the 1950s and 1960s, television producers and sponsors had to begin to consider the new value of this audience, its interests, and its consumer desires.

## TELEVISION REPRESENTATION AND STRUGGLES OVER STEREOTYPING AND AUTHENTICITY

Typically, we each like to believe that, with the progression of time, comes political progress—that our culture grows more enlightened. This “teleological” approach to history is the way of thinking that underlines assumptions that—in the 1950s when programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS, 1951–1953) and *Beulah* (ABC, 1950–1953) were on the air—the majority audience was overtly racist, unenlightened, and unaware of black American culture and equality, in comparison to the present era of *Girlfriends* and *Oprah* (1986–present, syndicated). But we should consider that change does not necessarily occur with the passage of time, but may occur in critical historical moments, in a climate of conflict and struggle between competing social ideals and expectations.

In spite of utopian hopes for television, early network programming generally adopted the same logic and strategies of historically biased

depictions of race, class struggle, gender, and ethnicity from film, vaudeville, and radio before it. As the Civil Rights Movement began to thrive, while such older representations continued on television screens, many argued that network television had abandoned its public service responsibilities for sheer profit-making motives. Images that were familiar from past entertainments were, apparently, commercially viable even if they were not palatable to some members of the audience.

When we consider how such television images make meaning and how we read television images, we think of television as an ideological site of cultural representation. As scholar John Fiske has argued, when we think of television images and their power to “represent,” we are talking about television as a medium that, more often than not, tends to reproduce and maintain society’s generally accepted and dominantly promoted beliefs—what we often presume to be the cultural “common sense.”<sup>8</sup> This idea implies that the television text encourages the viewer to identify with particular points of view that each viewer may accept or reject, in whole or in part. Reading and interpretation, or the meanings that people make of television texts, are, in this sense, largely dependent on individual identity and the context within which the images are read.<sup>9</sup> What makes television—and most popular cultural artifacts—so worthy of study is the paradoxical ability to allow for various possible reading positions in relation to fairly consistent ideological ideals. That is, while privileging dominant ideology and rewarding viewers who can manage to conform to or identify with the most comfortable, common sense reading of the text, television programs and many advertisements also contain enough diverse elements to draw those outside this imagined, dominant ideal to find pleasure and meaning in such texts. The meanings that surface and circulate on television always exist in conversation with broader cultural ideals and expectations in a given historical period. Television does not create these ideals on its own, but it contributes to their larger social impact.

When people refer to representation in television, they are generally referring to the ways in which visual images and sounds create certain kinds of assumptions about the identity and characteristics of particular groups of people within society. For instance, there are frequent debates over television’s representation of women or of the family, as well as of the representation of African American culture. Debates over representation fuel many of the most fiercely pitched battles over television in our culture and point to the power that television images are presumed to have, as well as to the way that viewers are often presumed to be influenced by those images—influence that supposedly carries over to their attitudes and actions in public, outside of the home. There is a very strong assumption within our culture that what we see on television shapes our perception of people in

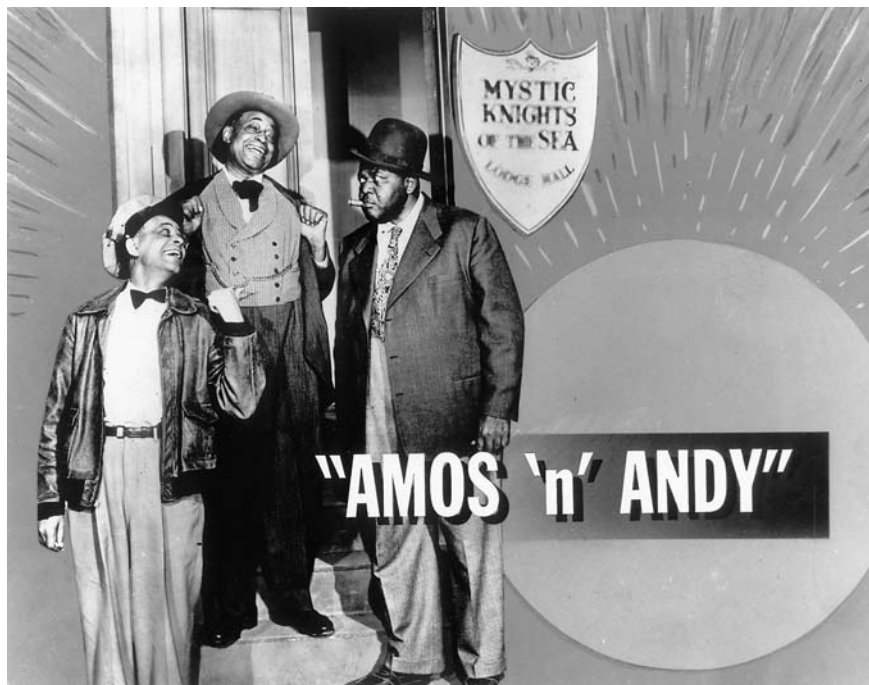
the world. Debates over representation in television are, in this way, also debates about the medium itself. They imply certain assumptions about how viewers relate to the medium and interpret its images. These debates tend to take as their premise that viewers typically perceive of television as a reflection of the world in some real way.

Television typically presents us with a few images that stand in for a whole group of people. These few images, because they are broadcast to the nation at large, appear to give recognizable and fixed identities to cultural groups that, in reality, are complex and varied. This argument applies to all other popular media as well, such as the airbrushed images of supermodels gracing the pages of glossy magazines. We know these images to be untrue and not representative of women in general, but, at the same time, many of us invest in the ideals of beauty, success, glamour, and individual achievement that those same images represent. Such images seem to ratify the broader "American Dream" on which much of the nation's life and culture are founded. African Americans have always had a somewhat critical or self-conscious relation to this ideology, based on the legacy of enslavement and institutional racism that, historically and systematically, have discouraged equal access to this dream.

Stereotypes survive and thrive in our culture largely because of their ambivalence. Their power lies in the fact that, although they appear to fix the identity of a group through a set of highly charged, visible, quickly understandable traits; in doing so, they make the other an object of desire as well as an object of contempt. Early in television history, vivid examples of such stereotyping included *Amos 'n' Andy's* stumbling leading men and also *Beulah's* "mammy" character. Both of these stereotypes continued long and popular traditions from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American arts and culture, as fixtures of traveling minstrel shows, of vaudeville routines, and, later, as stock characterizations in motion pictures and on radio programs. These were characters that functioned to defuse any sense that black Americans had either legitimate complaints about their oppression within American culture or that, given equal standing and opportunity, they would be able to capitalize on it.

In the postwar American context, critics argued that programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*, by reenergizing and repopularizing characterizations inherited from older media forms, undermined contemporary black legitimacy and power and effectively encouraged the American culture at large to underestimate the role and demands of black Americans in the burgeoning Civil Rights era. In this sense, stereotypes are mobilized or prominent at particular moments in history because they help defuse dominant cultural anxieties or fears in times of transition.

Alvin Childress (as Amos Jones), Tim Moore (as George “Kingfish” Stevens), Johnny Lee (as Algonquin J. Calhoun), and Spencer Williams (as Andrew Hogg Brown) in *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, 1951–1953.



CBS/Photofest

Although we could also point to the one-sided portrayals of doddering white suburban fathers, or of white housewives who wore pearls as they vacuumed in 1950s situation comedies, as stereotypical representations of unreal whiteness, there was a significant difference between such stereotypes and those in *Andy* and *Beulah*. These portraits of suburban placidity and frivolity were idealized within dominant culture as epitomizing the American Dream, whereas *Amos 'n' Andy*'s and *Beulah*'s characters were, conversely, made fun of—they were disempowered in relation to dominant cultural ideology. Seen as incapable of attaining the American Dream, African American characters in early television comedy stood in as symbols of what not to do and be—as that which threw the proper pursuit of the American Dream into relief by contrast. And yet stereotyping also functions to underscore feelings of inadequacy, lack, and genuine desire—the second part of the ambivalence that is the source of the stereotype's power.

*Beulah*'s character, for instance, is clearly far more interesting than her white employers, the Hendersons. It is only through her that the

Hendersons, by association, come to life. But, considering the broader social context of segregation in the early 1950s, Beulah's attractiveness and power also had to be contained. So, in the series, Beulah is kept within a carefully contained place in the kitchen and in her affiliation with the Henderson's child, Donny, rather than associated with the adult world or the public space outside the home. Beulah thus liberates the Hendersons, while staying well within her place as a stereotypical mammy. *Beulah* was also the first sitcom to star and be named for a black woman. Equally, the program was co-produced by its stars and was tremendously popular and therefore lucrative for the African American

**Diahann Carroll (as Julia Baker), Lloyd Nolan (as Dr. Morton Chegley), and Marc Copage (as Corey Baker) in *Julia*, 1968–1971.**



NBC/Photofest

actors in its cast. So, the program's stereotyping was read in multiple and conflicting ways by the audience of its time. Some readers of *Ebony* magazine, for example, responded that *Beulah* was an absolutely necessary first step to greater equality in television of the future and that it was a thrill to see an African American character on screen every single week within a prime-time schedule that was otherwise almost exclusively white in its composition. So, when thinking about stereotypical images, we have to understand that representation on television is always conflicted, complex, and political.

In the 1960s, new images of African Americans began to appear in prime-time television; these images struggled to evade stereotypes while also avoiding engagement with topical social issues. For example, scholar Aniko Bodroghkozy has studied the series *Julia* (NBC, 1968–1971) as a program that was symptomatic of the larger social dialogue or constellation of racial tensions and reconfigurations in American culture of the late 1960s.<sup>10</sup> *Julia* entered into dialogue with a larger social and cultural struggle over “what it meant to be black” and “what it meant to be white” at the end of the 1960s in America. In the context of the ratification of the Civil Rights Act, the emergence of the Black Panthers, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and the urban uprisings of the late 1960s, for many Americans, this was a revolutionary time. Bodroghkozy argues that 1968 was a time in history when many viewers were looking for more realism in their programming—programs that reflected these larger social tensions. In this regard, *Julia* was caught in a bind. As noted by historian J. Fred MacDonald, whenever a black entertainer appeared in national media in the 1960s, he or she was expected to represent all African Americans, embodying the panorama of black life from suburbia to urban core.<sup>11</sup>

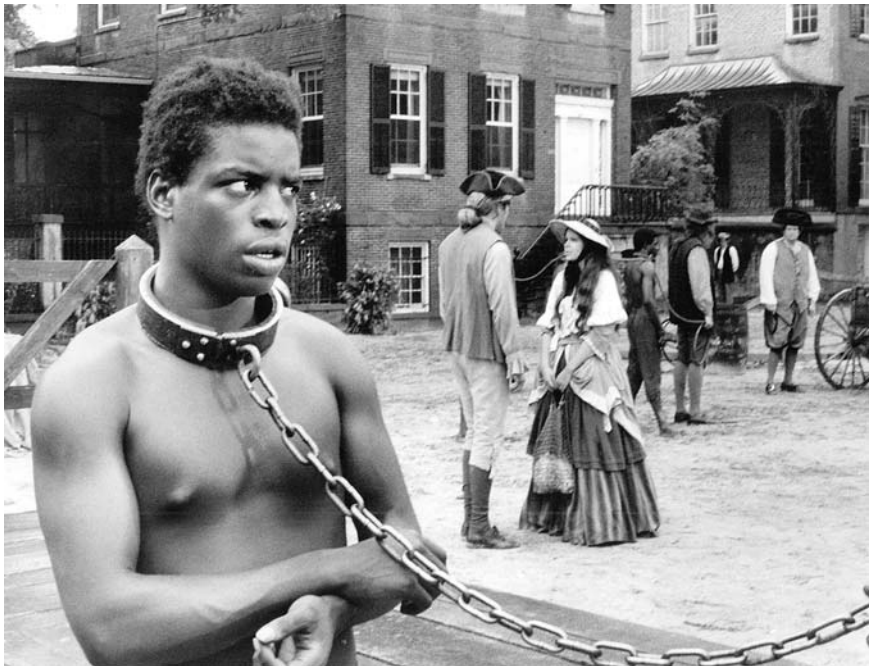
This burden of representation meant that *Julia*—whose lead character, played by Diahann Carroll, was a middle-class single mother, registered nurse, and widow of a Vietnam War hero—was often interpreted as inauthentic, to both black and white audience members. To many African American viewers, *Julia* didn't appear to assert herself as black; among many white viewers, *Julia* seemed too successful—criticisms that very thinly masked white America's discomfort with *Julia*'s ease in integrated environments and her material success within the framework of the American Dream of individual achievement. Bodroghkozy's study of viewer responses to *Julia* concludes that, among other things, the series underscored that the increasing anxiety over the gradual eradication of traditional racial hierarchies at such a revolutionary moment in U.S. history—a marked anxiety, particularly, over whiteness as an increasingly indeterminate terrain.

The late 1960s had brought a great deal of social upheaval, much of which was shown in television news reports and documentaries. In particular, events involving issues of race, gender, and generational clashes had

awakened advertisers and network executives to the fact that American culture was full of different groups with varied interests, rather than being a homogeneous audience. Equally, there was growing awareness that these groups did not necessarily watch the same programming at the same time—that the television audience itself was increasingly segmented. Advances in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s ushered in integration and affirmative action legislation and led to an increased awareness of the economic viability of a thriving African American consumer class that was increasingly attractive to national advertisers. New rules in broadcasting in the early 1970s encouraged changes in the ways that networks acquired, promoted, and scheduled prime-time programming.

Television producers responded to such social upheavals and shifts by trying to create socially relevant programming. As the 1970s began, the networks' share of the expanding, well-educated, urban, socially activist youth audience was shrinking. In this climate, networks were willing to give a chance to ethnically, racially, and economically diverse variety series and sitcoms. The resulting programs, created largely by independent producers such as Norman Lear, included *The Flip Wilson Show* (NBC, 1970–1974),

Levar Burton in ABC's miniseries *Roots*, 1977.



ABC/Photofest

*Good Times* (CBS, 1974–1979), and *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985). Instead of going after all of the viewers with such programs, however, some networks began to strategize to get the right kind of viewers—to target a group of particularly lucrative viewers. This became a battle over demographics. By 1970 it had become clear to networks and advertisers that the young adult, urban, and, particularly, female audience between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine was the ideal demographic market. When demographics are emphasized, rather than ratings, the portion of the audience that a program attracts from its target demographic becomes more important than the total, aggregate number of viewers tuned into a program. And yet, in the late 1970s, *Roots* (ABC, January 23–January 30, 1977) and *Roots: The Next Generations* (ABC, February 18–February 25, 1979) literally invented the miniseries form and captured the unprecedented attention of a mass, multiracial, multigenerational nation of viewers while focusing on slavery—an American institution that had typically been suppressed from public discussion. Was the mass, mainstream U.S. audience ready to embrace fully programs that were focused on African American life and culture?

In the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992) came to be both praised and critiqued as the epitome of mass-audience, post–Civil Rights era representations of race. *The Cosby Show* was the first predominantly black-cast sitcom to portray an affluent, intact, African American nuclear family. *Cosby*’s enormous mainstream popularity reinvigorated debates over authenticity in television portrayals of black life and culture. Why, for example, did more class-diverse and issue-engaged programs that were seriocomedic and dramatic, such as *Frank’s Place* (CBS, 1987–1988), *South Central* (Fox, 1994), or *Under One Roof* (CBS, 1995)—each of which overtly addressed the social problems, continuing racial discrimination, and class struggles that *The Cosby Show* assiduously avoided—die quickly during the same era in which sitcoms such as *Cosby* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC, 1990–1996) were so beloved?

In the first few seasons of *The Cosby Show*’s run, television had begun to undergo the first radical change to its structure since its inception. The first challenge to the Big Three networks (NBC, CBS, ABC) came in the late 1980s, when Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation launched the Fox Network. The Fox Network built up its audience by targeting typically underserved viewers—particularly, youth and urban African American audiences. From 1987 on, the Fox Network challenged the classic “Big Three” broadcasters, with fast-paced programs featuring diverse and all–African American casts (such as *In Living Color*, 1990–1994; *Roc*, 1991–1994; and *Martin*, 1992–1997). The Big Three continued to have their dominance challenged and their audience eroded with the late 1980s and 1990s emergence of Weblets—UPN, the WB (now combined as the CW)—challengers such as the Spanish language telecaster, Univision, and



family-friendly start-ups such as PAX-TV (now Ion). Using the same strategy that had been initiated by Fox, these new networks targeted urban, youth, and underrepresented audiences to build their early economic base, from which their schedules have expanded to reach wider, more mainstream audiences.

Although programs in the late 1990s were targeting and, therefore, supposedly speaking to and for African American audiences, those featured on Fox were consistently under fire for repackaging old minstrel stereotypes for a rapidly nearing new millennium. The question of authenticity—or appropriate representation versus black access, exposure, and widespread mainstream acceptance within television production and broadcasting—is one that is revived every year regarding the few shows that feature predominantly black casts. Artist and scholar Marlon Riggs powerfully identified the core dilemma that is central to this ongoing debate. In *Color Adjustment* (1993), his video history of African American representation in U.S. television, Riggs asks whether any medium whose reason for being is to sell the American Dream of free-market consumption and class rise can ever possibly include those who have been excluded from that dream on a systematic basis: could television authentically address black life and still sell the American Dream?

Overall, questions of racism and television representation focus on how television participates in the development and ongoing definition of a national culture and citizenship ideals. When television appears to “naturalize” certain images as “common sense” embodiments of the American Dream and demonize or caricature others, it often becomes a central figure in crises regarding national identity and representational ideals within the broader culture, beyond the television screen.

## **VIEWERS TALK BACK: PUBLIC ACTIVISM AND ALTERNATIVE TV**

Television history is marked by ongoing activism and agitation for change. African American and allied protests over representation and regulatory oversight, as well as participation in the production and promotion of alternative media forms to mainstream commercial television, have been vital in intervening in and remedying racist practices in television. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was particularly active in the protest against *Amos 'n' Andy* in the 1950s and has remained active as a watchdog group that monitors each new series in development to the present day. In the case of *Amos 'n' Andy*, the program's supporters argued that, as the first program in prime-time television with an all-black cast, the series gave talented African Americans unprecedented access to television careers and to a vast viewing audience. The program's critics argued that it misrepresented the lives of black Americans by

portraying the central characters as buffoons. The NAACP argued that such inauthentic representations had a direct impact on the continued oppression and exclusion of African Americans from equal rights and justice in the world beyond the television screen. Within two seasons, the NAACP was successful in getting *Amos 'n' Andy* removed from CBS's prime-time schedule, although the series continued to be popular in syndication through the early 1960s.

The 1960s represented a new moment in terms of television history and public activism. Although public interest had always been a consideration—the basis on which all stations were licensed—it was only in the 1960s that the notion of public interest extended to the concept of legal “standing,” or participation in the regulatory and license renewal proceedings concerning a local station or licensee. Public standing was instituted as a result of a court case that began in 1955: a group of citizens from Jackson, Mississippi, made the first of a long series of complaints to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) about the conduct of local station WLBT.<sup>12</sup> WLBT was accused of blatant discrimination against African Americans, who formed 45 percent of the station's viewing audience. The public who complained to the FCC had taken careful notes and provided detailed accounts proving that the station used airtime to promote a segregationist philosophy and, in general, had denied the use of its airwaves to any proponents of civil rights causes, such as political candidates or public service announcements by local interest groups. In one example, WLBT had deliberately cut off a network program about race relations on which the general counsel of the NAACP appeared.

Initially, the FCC dismissed the citizens' complaints, saying that they had no legal right to participate in a licensing decision. By 1964, the United Church of Christ (UCC) had joined the campaign against WLBT, providing legal services and funding to the Citizens of Jackson in their plight. The UCC petitioned the FCC, on behalf of local groups, for the permission to intervene in the license renewal application, but the FCC again rejected the petition, saying that the citizens had no legal standing. In spite of licensing renewal regulations—which asserted that stations had to prove that they served in the public interest—those populations who were injured and silenced by the station's business practices were silenced in the regulatory process as well. The FCC said that only other broadcasters could have standing in licensing hearings that challenged current broadcasters. The UCC filed a complaint against the FCC with the U.S. Court of Appeals. The Court determined that the FCC had no right to bar the public from renewal hearings or to renew a license automatically, without a hearing. The FCC held a hearing but renewed WLBT's license anyway, which led the UCC to return to court. In 1969 the Court finally ruled that the FCC had to cancel WLBT's license and appoint an unbiased, interim operator until a new permanent licensee could be found.

In total, the case against WLBT and challenge to the FCC took over a quarter of a century to decide. But, in the end, it proved the effectiveness of public activism in relation to a broadcast station's performance. It forced the FCC to practice its stated regulatory standard of public interest. It also put local stations on the alert that licensing renewal was no longer, necessarily automatic. The WLBT case is considered to have been a real catalyst for the wave of public activism that emerged around broadcasting in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that continues to this day. Following the case, several public interest groups formed for the specific purpose of serving as television watchdogs.

In 1967 the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was created by the Public Broadcasting Act to be a partnership between the government (through congressional appropriations) and corporations (through private donation) to provide for the administration of funding for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), which distributes programming for public television stations. The Act's mandate was to "facilitate the full development of educational broadcasting in which programs of high quality, obtained from diverse sources, will be made available" to participating stations. Scholar Christine Acham has discussed the promise that PBS held for many African American viewers and members of the television news and production community in her history of *Black Journal*, which began airing on PBS in 1968. *Black Journal* represented a rare nonfiction program dedicated to black issues and, crucially, produced by African Americans. According to Acham, *Black Journal* "boasted a 75 percent black technical crew and a 95 percent black production crew, an unprecedented occurrence on a nationally televised program."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, *Black Journal* represented a "site of black cultural resistance because it was positioned within this mainstream forum yet still produced critical black news coverage"<sup>14</sup> that challenged much of the style and content of reporting on the traditional "Big Three" networks of NBC, CBS, or ABC.

Perhaps PBS's biggest success, however, was a program that was explicitly designed to target "underprivileged inner-city children" who were imagined to be primarily African American and Latino. The brainchild of Joan Ganz Cooney and the Carnegie Corporation, *Sesame Street* premiered in 1969 with the goal to "diminish the disparity in" educational "opportunity created by poverty" through the colorful, quick-cutting, catchy musical appeal of television and, further, of commercial advertising ("today's program is brought to you by the letter T").<sup>15</sup> The show incorporated soul music and references to African American culture, featured a diverse cast of humans and a multihued cast of "muppets" who lived together in one neighborhood. The show's tremendous popularity with an entire generation across race, class, gender, and geographic lines has remained a model for progressive, educational

television and for successors such as *Little Bill* (Nickelodeon, 1999–present) and *Dora, The Explorer* (PBS, 2000–present).

Until the 1990s, cable television was not a serious competitor to the Big Three networks. Cable began as an alternative way for broadcasters' signals to reach viewers who lived in areas too mountainous, too rural, or too densely populated to receive over-air broadcast signals. Indeed, cable is almost as old as network television itself. However, throughout the 1980s, deregulation policies allowed for cable to expand and compete directly with broadcasters by offering channels that were exclusively "on cable" and that provided competing programming. By the summer of 1997, for the first time, basic cable channels (such as CNN, ESPN, Lifetime, etc.) had captured a larger portion of the prime-time viewing audience than the broadcast networks. Cable promised to offer programming that was targeted to populations that had typically been underrepresented in over-air broadcasting. Among the first cable networks, for example, CNN offered a format of twenty-four-hour news updates. The principal anchor of CNN, from its inception, was African American journalist Bernard Shaw. Black Entertainment Television (BET) was founded in 1980 by Robert L. Johnson and a group of investors with the explicit goal of providing black-focused entertainment.

Cable and satellite TV proponents argue that, by offering specialized "neighborhoods" that address particular communities, these technologies have the capacity to democratize popular culture, opening up the airwaves to previously unheard voices and, simultaneously, addressing and incorporating new audiences into those communities. On the other hand, others maintain that these technologies fragment the American public into segregated, atomized interest groups, encouraging existing preconceptions about race and identity. Do newer media, including the Internet, encourage viewers to remain in their own, preestablished comfort zones, choosing their media "homes" from those that mirror their already-familiar everyday life? Or do these media encourage viewer or users to seek out actively and explore new venues and cultures that might challenge their existing worldview?

## TELEVISION IN THE 2000s AND BEYOND

Since the mid-1990s, one of the clearest trends in media ownership is its increasing concentration in fewer and fewer hands. The major media companies own vast portfolios of products, spanning the range of media formats and delivery systems. While concentration of ownership has been occurring, conglomeration has been taking place. That is, media companies have become part of much larger corporations that own a collection of other companies that may operate in diverse business areas. An example of the importance of race images and African American audiences to this

new business context is the case of ESPN and its Original Entertainment Programming division.

ESPN Original Entertainment Programming (EOE) includes original dramatic programming and reality series that are produced to run on each of the networks' multiple outlets. EOE has recently focused on hip-hop style and culture to ally its programs and ESPN networks with a "stylish, youthful . . . sensual" imagination of black culture and black cultural authenticity that ultimately emphasizes its featured athletes' and audience's investment in the structural rewards that come from working within dominant cultural institutions (such as the professional sports team). According to the ESPN Original Programming Sales and Marketing Department, its series are designed to appeal most to "African American and Hispanic scene-makers and other 12- to 24-year old male urban hipsters."<sup>16</sup> This is a generation of viewers that ESPN—and its corporate parents, ABC/Capital Cities and Disney—understands to be innately comfortable with integration and with the cross-promotion of video gaming, music, film, fashion, and sport through hip-hop address. EOE is essential to the future of the network and to its expansion, globally, however, as a "gateway" for young, urban audiences to become part of the corporation's "family" of media interests. ESPN includes not only its multiple television networks and programs (most of which are global in reach) but also encompasses ESPN Internet, ESPN Wireless, ESPN Print, ESPN Radio, ESPN Gaming, ESPN Music/Recording division, and ESPN "Built Environment" destinations, including ESPN Sports Zone restaurant and entertainment centers. With Disney and ABC/Capital Cities, ESPN has an extended reach wherever Disney and ABC are also present in the market.

Through EOE to a young, urban population, ESPN can offer sponsors an entirely different audience than that of its news and information programming. Through these programs and their hip-hop appeals, ESPN can promise sponsors that it will deliver these emerging consumers to advertisers across all of its "platforms": From Original Programs, ESPN "sells through" to ESPN's multiple networks, to ESPN.com on the web, to *ESPN The Magazine* in print, and to ABC Urban Advantage Radio Networks, as well as to EA-Sports' ESPN-partnered video games. Consistency in both target audience and overall mode of address across these platforms is ensured through the hip-hop aesthetic that is common to each. Essential to this strategy is ESPN2's *Friday Night Block Party* of programming. Scheduled with all-new programming during summer, followed by heavy reruns across ESPN's family of networks throughout the remainder of the year, *The Block Party* currently includes *Friday Night Fights* boxing, the AND-1-sponsored reality program about the Mixtape Tour Streetball league, called *Streetball*, as well as alternating rotations of *The*

*Life* and *The Season*, both of which are documentary series that go “behind the scenes” for a day in the life of a professional athlete or amateur team, respectively.

During the summer of 2003, hip-hop artist and actor Mos Def was brought in to host *The Block*, which, since its inception that year, has been explicitly identified with hip-hop as a strategy to attract heavy viewers of the emerging target demographic (the “super fans”) as well as those that ESPN/ABC’s Sports Customer Marketing and Sales Department identifies as “light consumers of ESPN” or those “new to the network,” who will be attracted by the featured mix of “athletes and celebrities in hip-hop, sports, and entertainment.” In the main, EOE posits that blackness, masculinity, hip-hop, and professional sports celebrity are innately interrelated.

And yet, in this multimediated, highly commercialized media environment, Internet technology and the rapid explosion in relative affordability of video production technology have encouraged viewers to become image producers in their own right. The Internet now regularly provides a forum for “homemade television” that can stream into homes around the world. Such productions allow for immediate response and critique of mainstream media in ways that encourage alternative views and images to be heard and seen. Following Hurricane Katrina, for example, the Web site “The Black Lantern” (<http://www.theblacklantern.com>) posted a short, downloadable film that combined footage from the pro-Confederacy silent-era film, *The Birth of A Nation* (1915); hip-hop star Kanye West’s commentary taken from a television fundraiser in which he stated “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people;” and news footage from the around-the-clock coverage of the storm and its aftermath—all set to a remix of West’s smash hit single “Golddigger,” as crafted by “The Legendary KO.” The video, titled “George Bush Doesn’t Care about Black People,” offered a powerful critique of federal response to the disaster while also clearly contextualizing that response as part of a larger, national history of systematic oppression and inequity.

Despite the exciting possibilities of new media technology and routes to individual modes of production, among the estimated 70 percent of the U.S. population not defined as “part of the technological elite”—a segment of the population that is disproportionately black and Latino, rural and Southern—more than 96 percent have more than one television set within the home. As of 2006, despite competition from the Internet and mobile technologies, “Americans are watching more television than ever,” with a television set on in households an average of eight hours and fourteen minutes each day.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore critical to continue to acknowledge and interrogate actively the ways in which television remains central to the broad majority of Americans’ everyday life as the

key resource for news, entertainment, and the imagination and debate over identity of all forms.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. This model of television as a social institution is one that is used by several prominent television studies scholars, including Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Is This What You Mean by Color TV?" Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's *Julia*," in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 142–167; Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955–1969* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness'* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995); Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007); and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

2. See, for example, Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 2003); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Michael Omi, "In Living Color: Race and American Culture," in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, eds. Sut Jhally and Ien Ang (New York: Routledge, 1989), 111–122.

3. See also Victoria E. Johnson, "Television and Civil Rights," in *Civil Rights in the United States*, Vol. 2, eds. Waldo E. Martin and Patricia Sullivan (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2000): 719–721.

4. Albert Barnett, "Television May Well Be the Handiwork of God," *The Chicago Defender* (July 1, 1950): 20.

5. See, regarding the hopes for a "Double-V," J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans In Television Since 1948*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1992); and Thomas Cripps, "Amos 'n' Andy and the Debate over American Racial Integration," in *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Ungar, 1983): 33–54.

6. For further expansion of these ideas, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising and the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," in *Private Screenings*, Spigel and Mann, 71–109.

7. For these statistics and data, see Sidney W. Head, Christopher H. Sterling, and Lemuel B. Scofield, *Broadcasting in America: A Survey of Electronic Media*, 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994).

8. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

9. Stuart Hall, "encoding/decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980), 128–138.

10. Bodroghkozy, "Is This What You Mean," in *Private Screenings*, Spigel and Mann, 142–167.

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11. J. Fred MacDonald. *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1992); and MacDonald's *One Nation under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV* (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1999).

12. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow*.

13. Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 41.

14. *Ibid.*, 42.

15. Kathleen Collins, "Sesame Street: Children's Educational Public Television Program," in *Encyclopedia of Television*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 2nd ed. (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004): 2056.

16. Quoting ESPN/ABC Sports Customer Marketing and Sales Department.

17. Josh Getlin, "Time Spent Watching Television Increases," *Los Angeles Times* (September 22, 2006): C3.

18. As noted in John B. Horrigan, "Consumption of Information Goods and Services in the United States," *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (November 23, 2003), [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Info\\_Consumption.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Info_Consumption.pdf), also in U.S. Census data.



# African American Stereotypes in Prime-Time Television: An Overview, 1948–2007

*Angela M. Nelson*

In American culture and society, the diffusion of African American stereotypes dates back to the 1700s. Stereotypes are oversimplified, standardized images or ideas that one person or group holds of another group and uses to justify or rationalize its dislike of that other group. In fact stereotypes reveal little about their subject but a great deal about the group that holds them.

African American stereotypes were created to draw attention to the racial differences thought to exist between whites and blacks and served to maintain the inferior status of African Americans and show that blacks differed significantly from whites “physically, intellectually, and temperamentally.” In addition, stereotypes of African Americans were used to prove that animosity between whites and blacks was inevitable; to show that miscegenation—sexual relations between people of different races, especially of different skin colors, leading to the birth of children—was a “sublime evil”; and to demonstrate that a biracial society was an impossibility best remedied through various forms of subordination to the dominant white society or by the outright removal of African Americans from the United States. Ultimately stereotypes were used to justify slavery, segregation, and racial subordination.

This chapter will describe the primary stereotypes of African Americans in prime-time television situation comedies from 1948 to the present. Since black stereotypes in American popular culture originated in the seventeenth century, a brief overview of predominant stereotypes will be outlined to show historical antecedents and moments of historical continuity. A discussion of how these African American identities and subject positions have changed—and how they have not—will follow.

As one of the most dominant genres of prime-time television programming, sitcoms are especially worthy of examination when it comes to the portrayal of African American stereotypes:<sup>1</sup> they comprise about two-thirds of all television programming today; they have a long mass media history dating back to radio; and they have starred more African Americans than any other prime-time television programming format.

The programs discussed will include those (1) that air or have aired on broadcast networks and cable channels of American commercial television from 1948 to the present, (2) that feature blacks in racially integrated and all-black casts, and (3) that feature black characters in leading roles.

This discussion of African American stereotypes is divided into four significant racial humor categories. These categories relate to how African Americans have been portrayed in situation comedies: (1) hybrid minstrelsy and black employment, (2) assimilationist minstrelsy and black glamour, (3) assimilated hybrid minstrelsy, and (4) multiculturalism, simultaneity, and diversification.<sup>2</sup> Before discussing prime-time television in particular, I will provide a brief overview of black stereotypes in American popular culture.

## STEREOTYPES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN POPULAR CULTURE

The nineteenth-century cultural products that describe and crystallize African American images into recognizable, recurring stereotypes are diverse and situated squarely within the domain of popular culture. These cultural artifacts include minstrel shows, novels, poetry, plays, autobiographies, memoirs, nonfiction books, advertising, magazine and newspaper articles, cartoons, and sheet music.

Of these cultural products, minstrel shows and the works of southern novelists, dramatists, and journalists were the most influential in the creation and reflection of public attitudes toward free and enslaved Africans. When African Americans appeared in minstrel shows or literature, they almost always were exaggerated characters based more on contrived formulas than on actual human beings. White writers defended slavery by including black characters whose survival depended on the slave system and their relationships with Southern white owners and masters. Southern writers in particular expressed a form of racism that emphasized the lightheartedness and willingness of African Americans to serve whites. Opponents of slavery also used stereotypes. As is demonstrated most clearly in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), supporters of romantic racialism argued that enslaved Africans were natural Christians.

Euro Americans used six stereotypes to depict enslaved and free African Americans during the nineteenth century. The most prevalent stereotypes were Sambo, Nat, Mammy, Jezebel, the tragic mulatto, and the pickaninny.

Sambo and Nat represent stereotypes related to black men; Mammy and Jezebel specifically refer to black females; and the tragic mulatto and pickaninny can refer to black people of either sex.

### ***Minstrel Shows***

Although Sambo and Mammy greatly influenced white perceptions of African Americans well into the late 1950s and 1960s, it was their appearance in the minstrel shows of the 1800s that brought them to life and established them as beloved stage characters.<sup>3</sup>

Minstrelsy consisted of song, dance, and theatrical comedy—supposedly drawn from authentic black sources—organized around a clownish blackface. The blackface was a white male who applied black makeup to his face and accented it with white makeup around his eyes and mouth to create the wide-eyed, grinning look of a clown. By the 1830s, the song-and-dance routines of blackfaces were consistently used as entr'actes and afterpieces in formal American theaters, as well as in the medicine shows and circuses that traveled the frontiers.

The minstrel stage provided many nineteenth-century Americans with their only impression of black culture, and it was from the minstrel stage that black stereotypes would enter into advertising, film, radio, and television. The minstrels lampooned black food, dress, speech, and beliefs, and they portrayed blacks as lovers of music and dance who were happy under slavery. Always and in every conceivable manner, the white minstrel performers portrayed blacks in gross stereotypes. In short, minstrel shows helped to popularize all the black stereotypes that appeared in other popular arts.

### ***Sambo: Black Man as Happy, Loyal Underling***

The first major stereotype was Sambo and his alter egos, Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Uncle Remus, and Uncle Tom.<sup>4</sup> Sambo was docile, but irresponsible; loyal, but lazy; and humble, but chronically given to lying and stealing. His behavior was full of infantile silliness, his talk inflated with childish exaggeration.

Characteristically a house servant, Sambo felt a great amount of love and affection for his master; his loyalty was all-consuming and self-immolating. The epitome of devotion, Sambo often fought and died heroically trying to save his master's life. Yet Sambo had no thought of freedom; freedom held no incentive compared with serving his master.

In American minstrel shows, Sambo had three personalities. In rural settings, he was known as Jim Crow, an ignorant, fun-loving buffoon. Jim Crow represented the slow-thinking, slow-moving country and plantation dandy.

Wearing rags and a battered hat, Jim Crow spent his time sleeping, fishing, and hunting opossums.

The second Sambo stereotype common in Northern minstrel shows is Zip Coon, an urbanized, free black dandy in flashy clothing. Zip Coon was overly pretentious, prone to womanizing, and totally unequipped to deal with the life of a free man. He could not hold a job, he did not understand the urban North, and he could never succeed on his own. Zip Coon was easily recognized in his bright, exaggerated clothes: swallowtail coat with wide lapels, gaudy shirt, striped pants, spats, and a top hat. He was a high-stepping strutter with a mismatched vocabulary. Although he put on airs and acted elegantly, he was betrayed by his pompous speech filled with malapropisms and exaggerated inflections.

The third Sambo-like character sentimentalized on the minstrel stage and in Southern antebellum literature was old Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus. Dedicated and contented, Uncle Tom knew the role assigned to him by white society and accepted it happily. Uncle Tom was a so-called natural Christian—selfless, often enthusiastic, and subservient. He was a gentle and long-suffering bondman endowed with childlike innocence.

### ***Nat: Black Man as Angry and Fearsome Rebel***

Nat was a brute stereotype of black males who first appeared in antebellum literature but re-emerged with urgency when the fear of emancipation reached panic proportions in the mid-1800s.<sup>5</sup> Nat was vengeful, bloodthirsty, cunning, treacherous, and savage. He was the incorrigible runaway, the poisoner of white men, and the ravager of white women who defied all the rules of plantation society. Subdued and punished only when overcome by superior firepower, Nat retaliated when attacked by whites, led guerilla activities against isolated plantations, killed overseers and planters, and burned plantation buildings when he was abused.

After emancipation this image of the black male would persist, leading to countless lynchings by mobs made up of whites who assumed that black men were innately sexually dangerous.

### ***Mammy: Black Woman as Devoted Mother***

Another typical presentation of the blackface minstrel shows was that of Mammy.<sup>6</sup> The faithful, obedient domestic servant who was treated more as a family member than a slave, Mammy was well loved and yielded some authority in her white household. Often portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features, Mammy knew her place as an obedient servant and accepted her subordination. Mammy was loyally devoted to her white family, especially the children, often to the point of neglecting

her biological family. She believed that the whites for whom she and her ancestors had worked for generations would protect and defend her in difficult times. Usually obese and attired in a bandanna and a tight-collared, long-sleeved, ankle-length dress, Mammy typified the black mother figure in white homes. Her stereotypical character was the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in dominant American male thought at the time.

### ***Jezebel: Black Woman as Tantalizing Harlot***

If Mammy knew her place, the slave Jezebel did not.<sup>7</sup> She undermined white morality through sexual promiscuity that most whites ascribed to blacks in general.

Thomas Jefferson, in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, argued that black men were “more ardent after their female,” implying that black women liked this. However, Jefferson also asserted that “loves seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient.” In other words, the general opinion was that blacks were more sexual than whites, and their marriages were not founded on love or mutual affection, but on sexual attraction.

Operating under this stereotype, slave masters broke up slave families without worry or moral qualms. On the eve of the Civil War, the Southern legal theorist Thomas R. R. Cobb applied the logic of the Jezebel stereotype to the problem of slave rape. Cobb argued that the crime of raping a slave was “almost unheard of,” because rape required a lack of consent that “the known lasciviousness of the negro, render the possibility of its occurrence very remote.” In other words, the Jezebel stereotype avowed that the black woman was always available for the sexual pleasure of white men.

### ***Tragic Mulatto and Pickaninny: The Disgrace of Black Blood***

The stereotypes of the tragic mulatto and pickaninny were not necessarily gender specific.<sup>8</sup> The tragic mulatto was a light-skinned, mixed-race character found in literature before and after the Civil War. Cassy and George Harris of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were tragic mulattoes, but typically the stereotype was portrayed by a female.

The female tragic mulatto was usually a beautiful young woman who had been raised and educated as white. She lost her privileged position when spiteful enemies discovered that she was marked with black blood. These virtuous, but unfortunate women often died in shame or committed suicide after failing to regain their original status. White blood gave the tragic mulatto her physical beauty, above-average intelligence, and heroic virtue, and black blood caused all her problems.

The stereotypical pickaninny was a comical, half-clothed black child used in literature as a stark contrast to white children. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Topsy portrayed this stereotype opposite the angelic, blonde Eva. Pickaninnies were usually depicted as happy, playful, submissive, and animal-like. Often referred to in the plural, pickaninnies appeared in the background of plantation scenes, frolicking and running and jumping about much as domesticated animals.

Although the pickaninny was not as central a stereotype as Sambo and Mammy, the stereotype nevertheless reinforced the belief that slaves were happy, contented, and carefree on the plantation.

## THE DISSEMINATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STEREOTYPES BEFORE TELEVISION

Building on the past, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, African American stereotypes entered new arenas of popular culture. The most interesting fact about stereotypes of African Americans during the twentieth century is not the development of new stereotypes, although new black character types did appear after World War II. The significance of the twentieth century revolves around three events: the diverse modes of transmission within mass mediation; the magnitude and level of mass mediation; and the process by which the aural, oral, and visual qualities of several black stereotypes were integrated into American popular culture. The popular formats included in this wide dissemination of stereotypes included comic panels and strips, advertising, radio and film, and animated cartoons.

### *African American Stereotypes in Comic Art*

Black comic-strip characters in American print media date back as early as 1897.<sup>9</sup> White cartoonists from the late 1890s to the late 1920s exaggerated the physical characteristics of blacks to grotesque and distorted proportions. This typography of the African American, the Sambo stereotype, was characterized by a billiard-ball-shaped head with white, round bulging eyes; thick, white, clown-shaped lips; objectified hairstyles (if headgear was not drawn); totally black skin; and nondescript clothing or a uniform of some sort to denote the character's occupation as a servant or domestic. The figure of Sambo was based on the minstrel tradition, which treated African Americans as overgrown children given to the impetuosity of childhood—and which regarded them all as comic performers.

Two long-running black comic-strip series in two major black newspapers are *Bungleton Green*, which appeared in the *Chicago Defender* from 1920 to 1963, and *Sunnyboy Sam*, which appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* from

1929 to about 1950. *Bungleton Green*, drawn by four artists over forty-three years, portrayed the ironies of black life in Chicago through the eyes of the African American title character, Bungleton Green. *Sunnyboy Sam* was a comedy/gag strip, created by Wilbert Holloway, that at first depicted Sunnyboy with a heavy dialect, minstrel features, and an intense preoccupation with playing the numbers.

Both Bungleton and Sunnyboy were representative of the traditional fall guy, or schlemiel. However, by 1947, John Stevens notes that Sunnyboy was speaking like a college graduate.<sup>10</sup> Although *Bungleton Green* began as a comedy/gag strip, it switched to an action-adventure format in the early 1930s and again during the mid-1940s.

### ***African American Stereotypes in Advertising and Collectibles***

African Americans have a long (and disturbing) history in American advertising.<sup>11</sup> Starting with advertisements for the sale of slaves and in search of runaway slaves during the enslavement period in America, stereotypes of African Americans became rooted and grounded in American popular culture.

Food advertisements starring African Americans emerged just before the turn of the century. Two of the three earliest and most popular trademark images were developed in the nineteenth century: Aunt Jemima and Rastus, the Cream of Wheat chef. The third image, Uncle Ben, appeared in the 1940s. These faces have become American icons, representing home-cooked quality in food production.

Current images of African Americans on food products overturn the iconic images of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus the chef. These images are truer depictions of African Americans created by African Americans for mass consumption. Two current images of black females in food-product advertising are Sylvia, "the Queen of Soul Food," of Sylvia's Restaurant of Harlem, and Aunt Minnie of Aunt Minnie's Southern Style Entrees, based in Toledo, Ohio.

### ***African American Stereotypes in Animated Cartoons***

As stated above, the first comic strip to feature black characters did so in 1897, but it and other strips of the day were plagued by the same black stereotypes. African American images fared no better in animated cartoons.

The first black character to appear in an American animated cartoon was the smiling face of Coon in 1907. In 1915 Pat Sullivan created Sammy Johnsin, a Sambo stereotype and the first black character to star in his own silent animated cartoon series. Derogatory racial stereotypes of African

Americans in animated cartoon series continued well into the 1960s as cartoons that had been originally released in theaters were broadcast on television.<sup>12</sup>

### ***African American Stereotypes in Film and Radio***

The immediate antecedents to black stereotypes in television were those found in film and radio. In varying degrees, Sambo, Mammy, Uncle Tom, Nat, the tragic mulatto, and the pickaninny all appeared in radio and film.

The first radio sitcom was *Sam 'n' Henry* (the antecedent to the radio sitcom *Amos 'n' Andy*), which aired on the WGN network in 1926. Its two main characters were similar to the Sambo images seen in minstrelsy and depicted in Southern literature.<sup>13</sup>

According to black film historian Donald Bogle, white filmmaker D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), although a film classic, introduced black film stereotypes that lingered into the 1970s, including Toms, coons, Mammies, tragic mulattoes, and brutal bucks.<sup>14</sup>

Before the advent of television, films by black directors and black film production companies were no more accurate.<sup>15</sup> Between 1910 and 1930, such black film directors/producers as Bill Foster and the Foster Photoplay Company, Oscar Micheaux and the Micheaux Film and Book Company, and the Lincoln Motion Picture Company included the same kinds of stereotypes seen in films by white directors. Although these companies were pioneers in the creation of black-controlled, black-oriented film genres, the demand for negative stereotyped images of African Americans persisted.

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN STEREOTYPES IN SITUATION COMEDIES**

In this section, I will examine specific stereotypes in black sitcoms from 1948 to the present. I will show that many stereotypes (arranged according to racial humor categories) that originated during the U. S. enslavement period continue to shape and influence images of blacks in television today.

Black situation comedies are open-ended series of thirty-minute (including commercials), self-contained episodes made for television network and cable broadcasting. These comedies revolve around one or more plots (situations) and present stereotypical characterizations and ritualistic humor in the form of repetition, gags, and insults.<sup>16</sup> These African American situation comedies, or black sitcoms, feature African American culture and utilize what David Marc calls "black prime time 'dozens' humor," or black verbal art forms.<sup>17</sup> Other aspects of these shows include an emphasis on black music, art, and literature; a greater tendency to focus on black issues, such as racism and



discrimination; and a general representation of African American values, attitudes, and lifestyles.

The typical story formula of these and other sitcoms is the establishment of a situation, complication pertaining to the situation, confusion among the characters about the situation, and resolution of the situation. They frequently incorporate an irrational approach to reality, strongly leaning toward the concealment of facts.

Black sitcoms display several distinguishing features. Most have a regular cast of actors of African descent comprising a family and/or a producer, director, and/or writer of African descent. The episodes are written from the point of view of a black central character. Based on the values of that character, the shows amuse black and white (or inter-racial) audiences, emerging from self-conscious intentions—whether artistic, economic, or political—to illuminate African American characters and black experiences, real or created.<sup>18</sup>

Black sitcoms can be divided into three types: domcoms (domestic comedies), actcoms (action comedies), and dramedies (dramatic comedies).<sup>19</sup> Although black dramedies are very rare, four have aired since 1948: *Julia* (NBC, 1968–1971), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–1979), *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987–1988), and *South Central* (Fox, 1993–1994).

As with the majority of American situation comedies, characters are often seen at home; at the workplace; or in locations that represent a combination of the two, such as colleges and military dwellings. In most black sitcoms, core characters have limited-to-no interaction with characters from other ethnic and racial groups. When they do, it is usually with whites or Latinos.

Black sitcoms focus on the fact that the core characters are of the African American culture, and that their culture—including their lifestyle, beliefs, concerns, attitudes, and values—are African in origin.<sup>20</sup> However, little evidence supports the argument that these sitcoms do portray African American culture. As time has shown, black sitcoms are not black in the sense that they exhibit a specific African American worldview or black philosophy of life. Rather, they are black because the performers identify themselves as black; the audiences identify the performers as black; and the characters are supposedly dealing with their situations from a black perspective. This is clearly seen when issues or concerns that are unique to African American life, history, and culture are explored, including such issues as racism and discrimination.

However, more often than not, the cultural contexts of black Americans are not explicitly evident in black sitcoms, except when the shows emphasize black music, art, and literature as points of reference, along with the use of black language and black verbal art forms. A black sitcom that is based on an African American worldview might, for example, emphasize the importance of religion in African American culture throughout American history

within the series. The only black sitcom to attempt to do this successfully was *Frank's Place*.

### ***Hybrid Minstrelsy and Black Employment, 1948–1965***

The impact of visual images of African American stereotypes cannot be understated. Although film was for several decades the primary mass medium to project African American stereotypes to millions of viewers, the growing medium of television disseminated these images more rapidly—and more democratically, because audiences chose what to watch.

Television situation comedies thrived on stereotypes of all kinds. Black characters in early TV sitcoms were loyal servants, comic minstrels, Sambos, or a combination of the three. Representations of blacks during this period set a precedent for what was to follow. In *Watching Race*, Herman Gray rightly argues that contemporary representations of blacks remain in dialogue with this period of black representation and only now have begun to transcend this formative period.<sup>21</sup>

The hybrid minstrelsy and black-employment period of racial humor on television presented black sitcom characters in stereotypical and subservient roles—thereby making them socially, culturally, and politically separate from and unequal to whites. Black sitcoms appearing on television from 1948 to 1965 illustrated explicit social and cultural rules of race relations between blacks and whites. Specifically, black otherness (or black objectivity) was required for white subjectivity; blacks and whites occupied separate and unequal worlds; black labor was always in the service of white domesticity; and black humor was necessary for the amusement of whites.<sup>22</sup>

*The Laytons* (DuMont, 1948),<sup>23</sup> *The Beulah Show* (ABC, 1950–1953), and *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* (CBS, 1951–1953) were three black sitcoms that operated within the hybrid minstrelsy and black-employment category of American racial humor. During this time period, blacks also appeared in supporting roles in *Father of the Bride* (CBS, 1961–1962), *The Great Gildersleeve* (NBC, 1955–1956), *The Jack Benny Show* (CBS, 1950–1965), *Make Room for Daddy/The Danny Thomas Show* (ABC, 1953–1957; CBS, 1957–1964), *My Little Margie* (CBS, 1952; NBC, 1952; CBS, 1953; NBC, 1953–1955), and *The Stu Erwin Show* (ABC, 1950–1955).

In *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People found “Negro women as cackling, screaming shrews”; “inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest” black men; “unprofessional professionals” (Negro doctors as “quacks and thieves” and Negro lawyers as “slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics”); and Mammy-like female characters.<sup>24</sup> As a result of these observations, the NAACP applied sufficient pressure to persuade ABC and CBS to cancel both programs in 1953.

Louise Beavers (as Beulah); (front) Jane Frazee (as Alice Henderson), David Bruce (as Harry Henderson), and Stuffy Singer (as Donnie Henderson) in *Beulah*, 1950–1953.



ABC/Photofest

Five stereotypes represent the primary images of blacks in television from 1948 to 1965. The first was the Jim Crow figure, or Sambo; second, the Zip Coon figure, or coon; and third, Mammy. All of these characters stemmed from stereotypes portrayed in minstrel shows. Regarding the first two significant sitcoms featuring blacks in prime-time television, I have used characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* as prototypes. Therefore, I have derived two additional stereotypes from my own observations of *Beulah* and *Amos 'n' Andy*; respectively, and they are Oriole and Sapphire.

From the early 1950s on, large, unattractive black females now had such names as Oriole and Beulah (from *The Beulah Show*). The slow-walking, slow talking, lazy, unintelligent black male caricatures with criminal tendencies became Bill Jackson (from *Beulah*), Andy, Lightnin', and Kingfish (from *Amos 'n' Andy*), and Rochester (from the *Jack Benny Show*). Oriole, from *Beulah*, was the simpleminded black woman (somewhat like a dumb blonde or bimbo type)—a silly Aunt Jemima who was happy, but not quite all there. Sapphire, from *Amos 'n' Andy*, was the aggressive, strong-willed, domineering, loud-mouthed shrew. Beulah, from *Beulah*, was a Mammy type with strong overtones of an Aunt Jemima who was kind, generous, caring, sincere, happy, and self-sacrificing.

Bill Jackson, from *Beulah*, was consistently lazy and noncommittal concerning marrying Beulah. Amos, from *Amos 'n' Andy*, was loyal and diligent, but slow—a straight man to Andy, who also projected a mainstream, almost bourgeois, sensibility. Andy, from *Amos 'n' Andy*, was the lazy, obese partner of Amos, who was also thriftless, scheming, and idle.<sup>25</sup> Lightnin', from *Amos 'n' Andy*, was a slothful, slow-moving, simpleminded janitor.<sup>26</sup> Kingfish, from *Amos 'n' Andy*, was a scheming, well-dressed con man, usually unemployed and often skirting the edges of the law in some moneymaking scheme. Rochester, from *The Jack Benny Show*, was Jack Benny's valet—more or less a carbon copy of the Fetchit-like porter presented as a comically inept worker who on his own time was a trifling, carefree, crapshooting philanderer. However, Rochester was permitted a few sarcastic jibes to his employer, Benny.

### ***Assimilationist Minstrelsy and Black Glamour, 1961–1973***

Sitcoms in the assimilationist minstrelsy and black glamour category treat the social and political issues of black presence in particular, and racism in general, as individual problems. These shows are assimilationist to the extent that the worlds they construct are distinguished by the complete elimination—or, at best, marginalization—of social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity.<sup>27</sup>

Black television characters during the 1960s were fully assimilated into American culture and made little reference to black culture in their appearance and behaviors. These representations were more benign and less explicitly stereotypical. The fact of the characters' blackness is treated as a minor, if not coincidental, theme: present, but contained. Many black characters in prime-time television from 1961 to 1973 were subjected to a form of social control Cedric C. Clark terms "regulation." This means that all African American characters at that time had "some connection with an organization devoted to the maintenance of law and order, either domestically and internationally."<sup>28</sup>

New black stereotypes based on Julia Baker, from *Julia*, and Chet Kincaid, from the *Bill Cosby Show*, came into being. A third black sitcom appeared during this time period: *Barefoot in the Park* (ABC, 1970–1971), based on Neil Simon's play of the same title, featured a young, black newlywed couple trying to make ends meet in New York City. African Americans also appeared in supporting roles in other sitcom series: *Car 54, Where Are You?* (ABC, 1961–1963), *Hogan's Heroes* (CBS, 1965–1971); *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–1977); and *The Partners* (NBC, 1971–1972).

*Julia* (NBC, 1968–1971), which starred Diahann Carroll, and *The Bill Cosby Show* (NBC, 1969–1971) premiered approximately eighteen years after *Beulah*. Julia Baker was an articulate, slim, sexually attractive, and glamorous single mother and registered nurse. Chet Kincaid was a black and single high-school gym teacher living in Los Angeles; he was educated, middle class, and professional. The appeal of *Bill Cosby* was rooted in its integrated environment, Quincy Jones's music in the opening credits, and other affirming examples of African American culture, such as a picture of Martin Luther King in Kincaid's apartment.<sup>29</sup> *Barefoot in the Park* should have been more successful, because it encompassed the excitement and glamour of *Julia*. However, in the end, it left the prime-time television schedule after a mere thirteen episodes, because the plight of a young, black newlywed couple perhaps did not transfer well from the Broadway stage.

### ***Assimilated Hybrid Minstrelsy, 1972–1983***

Sitcoms in the assimilated hybrid minstrelsy category show black and white characters that are just alike, except for minor differences of habit and racial perspective. These sitcoms show that blacks face the same experiences, situations, and conflicts as whites, except that they are separate from whites.<sup>30</sup> Many of these series were based on Norman Lear's comedies or influenced by Lear, and the span of 1972 to 1983 was marked by a turn back to minstrel portrayals of blacks—especially Sambos and coons. The 1970s were characterized by J. Fred MacDonald as the "Age of the New Minstrelsy," because blacks were displaying in television comedy the same clownish and buffoonish behavior seen in early 19th-century entertainment and considered traditionally acceptable to white audiences.<sup>31</sup>

Following *Julia* and *The Bill Cosby Show*, the 1970s brought *Roll Out!*, the story of the black men of the 5050th Trucking Company, the Red Ball Express, operating during World War II; *Sanford and Son*, starring stand-up comedian Redd Foxx; *That's My Mama*, featuring Clifton Davis as a young, black male residing with his widowed mother in Washington, DC; *Good Times*, a spinoff from Norman Lear's sitcom *Maude*, starring Esther Rolle; *The Jeffersons*, another popular Lear black sitcom; *Grady*, a spinoff with a

LaWanda Page (as Aunt Esther Anderson) and Redd Foxx (as Fred Sanford) in *Sanford and Son*, 1972–1977.



NBC/Photofest

supporting character from *Sanford and Son* in the starring role; *What's Happening!!*, created by Bud Yorkin, Lear's partner, and loosely based on the film *Cooley High*; *Sanford Arms* and *Sanford*, both spinoffs that attempted to capitalize on the success of Redd Foxx and *Sanford and Son*; and *Baby, I'm Back*, featuring Demond Wilson, who formerly played Lamont in *Sanford and Son*.

Four comedies during this period featured Sapphire stereotypes: *Sanford and Son*, with Bible-toting Aunt Esther; *Good Times*, with the Evanses' neighbor Willona and daughter Thelma; Roger's little wisecracking sister, Dee, in *What's Happening!!*; and Louise Jefferson and Florence the maid in *The Jeffersons*. Shiftless and lazy black men, or coons, and simple Sambos were portrayed in the characters of Bubba, Fred Sanford, and Grady in *Sanford and Son*; Demond Wilson's character in *Baby, I'm Back*; J. J. of *Good Times*; George Jefferson of *The Jeffersons*; and many of the black male characters in *Roll Out!* Mammy figures can be seen in Florida Evans of *Good Times* and the "Mama"s of *That's My Mama* and *What's Happening!!* As pointed out earlier, *Sanford* and *Sanford Arms* were spinoffs of *Sanford and Son*, and these shows carried many of the same characters as the first sitcom.

By 1984 black situation comedy entered the Age of Cosby. However, immediately prior to the debut of *The Cosby Show*, two other black sitcoms aired on ABC: *One in a Million* (in 1980) and *The New Odd Couple* (from 1982–1983). *One in a Million* starred Shirley Hemphill (formerly of *What's Happening!!*), and *The New Odd Couple* was another attempt at taking a Neil Simon play (already a success on television with white characters) and placing black characters in the lead roles. Shirley Hemphill portrayed a Sapphire and Mammy-like character in her program, although Demond Wilson, in his second attempt in the sitcom format, was a coon-type figure.

Although the black characters of seventies sitcoms were still dominated by antebellum stereotypes, these characters have nevertheless been diverse. Additional black stereotypes in the 1970s and early 1980s included the hustla, or gangsta, who is essentially a post–World War II reincarnation of brutal bucks Nat and Jack from a comic or tragic black perspective; Black Power personas, or characters that espouse black or Afrocentric ideals of self-determination and knowledge about black culture; the new pickaninny, a sassy, back-talking black child; the matriarch, a black woman who heads, advises, and provides for her family; the new Jezebel, a black woman who is sexually free and rebellious; and jive and hip black men, who are shown as unintelligent womanizers always wisecracking or mugging for a laugh with dialect that often highlights that they are bad, untrustworthy characters.

The Lenny and Sweet Daddy characters in *Good Times* are good comedic examples of the hustla/gangsta stereotype. In addition, another related stereotype from *Martin*, Hustler Man, appeared periodically, as did Brother Man. Brother Man is a fantasy-type figure, because Martin and Gina are mystified as to how he enters their apartment and how he always departs with food. Although Brother Man is a difficult character to situate within the history of black television stereotypes, he seems to be a mix between the Sambo, B-Boy, and hustler stereotypes.

*Multiculturalism, Simultaneity, and Diversification, 1984–present*

Sitcoms in the discourse of multiculturalism, simultaneity, and diversification category began in 1984 with *The Cosby Show*. They offer a “view of what it means to be American from the vantage point of African Americans.” Also, many black sitcoms appearing after 1984 are engaged in a “cultural politics of difference within blackness” as well as illustrating the incorporation of innovative approaches to the television form in general.<sup>32</sup>

Beginning with this period, black actors participated more in the higher levels of television production, including in significant roles as producers, writers, and directors. Also, the comedy is based more upon African American value systems, as well as stock characterizations that could just as well be portrayed by a white person.

The Age of Cosby can be traced from 1984, when *The Cosby Show* debuted, to about 1990, with the premiere of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. *The Cosby Show* featured blacks who were regulated in that they were assimilated upper-middle-class families who had associations with other blacks. The main difference was that Sambo characterizations were almost entirely eliminated. *The Cosby Show* was viewed by many white and black critics as portraying yet another unrealistic representation of African American culture. Even with these criticisms, *The Cosby Show* enjoyed extremely high ratings and was the first sitcom to break away from traditional characterizations of blacks.

Immediately following the debut of *The Cosby Show* came several other shows featuring broken-down or revised stereotypes. One was *227*, which featured Marla Gibbs (formerly Florence of *The Jeffersons*). Gibbs’s character was Sapphire and Mammy all wrapped up into one, whereas the character Sandra was the Oriole type. Sherman Hemsley starred in *Amen* as a coonish character somewhat similar to his George Jefferson role. *Melba*, starring singer Melba Moore, used the same single-mother format for its plot, and during this period, *What’s Happening!!* went into syndication as *What’s Happening Now!!* with most of the same characters, only they were all grown up. Two other family-centered sitcoms premiered on ABC after *The Cosby Show*: *Charlie and Company* and *Family Matters*. *Charlie and Company* was a poor imitation of *The Cosby Show*, and *Family Matters* can be called a black sitcom only because the characters meet the physical characteristics, not because the plots accentuate African American culture.

In 1987 *Frank’s Place* debuted and was the second sitcom to be produced by an African American male (*The Cosby Show* was the first). The show featured Mammy-like characters, but they were not as offensive because of the overall wholesome context of this program. Also in 1987 came Bill Cosby’s



*A Different World*, which featured an ensemble cast at a predominantly black college. A Sapphire-like character was sometimes portrayed by Jaleesa, and the Oriole stereotype was represented by Freddie. Two sitcoms, *New Attitude* and *Sugar and Spice*, which focused primarily on black women, included an assortment of Sapphire characters.

Nelson George contends that four new African American character types came of age in the 1980s alongside *The Cosby Show*. These stereotypes—B-Boy/B-Girl; black, urban professional (BUP); black American princess or prince (BAP); and BoHo—were created by and for African Americans and appear in literature, stage, film, and television today.

Molded by hip-hop aesthetics and the tragedies of underclass life, the B-Boy/B-Girl has been the most celebrated and condemned of these character types, since this stereotype combines the explosive elements of poverty, street knowledge, and unfocused political anger.

Buppies, BAPs, and BoHos have come of age since the end of the struggle against blatant segregation. Through busing or family migration, many attended predominantly white schools and took their access to mainstream opportunities for granted. According to George, figures such as Bryant Gumbel, Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, and Senator Barack Obama epitomize this view. The black, urban professional (BUP), ambitious and acquisitive, is determined to savor the fruits of integration by any means necessary. The BAP (black American princess or prince), whether by family heritage or personal will, enjoys an expectation of mainstream success and acceptance that borders on arrogance. This character often borders the dumb-blonde stereotype usually reserved for white females. Male characters such as Carlton on *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* also can be a stooge-like character, a comic foil for the straight guy Will. The BoHo is a thoughtful, self-conscious figure, such as *A Different World*'s Cree Summer (Freddy) or rock band Living Colour's Vernon Reid, whose range of interest and taste challenges both black and white stereotypes of African American behavior.

In 1990 two black sitcoms debuted, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC) and *You Take the Kids* (CBS). *You Take the Kids* starred Nell Carter of *Gimme a Break*, but this time as a wife and mother who teaches piano lessons and guards over her four children. *You Take the Kids* featured African American characters, but paid no particular attention to African American culture. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, starring the rapper Will "Fresh Prince" Smith, was about a Philadelphia teen who moves in with his aunt in Bel-Air, California. The primary storyline is driven by the collision of Will's inner-city, hip-hop culture (language, fashion, and so on) with the upper-middle-class culture in Bel-Air.

The uniqueness of *The Fresh Prince* lies in its reversal of black stereotypes. Usually black dialect is used negatively to describe black male characters,<sup>33</sup>

Tatyana Ali (as Ashley Banks), Will Smith (as Will Smith), Alfonso Ribeiro (as Carlton Banks); (back) Karyn Parsons (as Hillary Banks), James Avery (as Philip Banks), Daphne Maxwell-Reid (as Vivian Banks), and Joseph Marcell (as Geoffrey) in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, 1990–1996.



NBC/Photofest

but in this sitcom, *The Fresh Prince* is accepted, and the television viewer is prompted to question the other characters—who have education, status, and money—because of their pretentiousness. The dumb-blonde stereotype usually reserved for white females is manifested in the character of Will's cousin Hillary. The common storyline of rich white families with

Martin Lawrence as Sheneneh in *Martin*, 1992–1997.



FOX/Photofest

butlers is overturned, also, because the Prince's black relatives not only have a butler/manservant—but a black, British-speaking one!

Another black stereotype, Sheneneh, surfaced in the 1990s. This stereotype's namesake is a character in the sitcom *Martin* (Lawrence portrayed this female in drag.) In the series, Sheneneh Jenkins wore hair extensions, tight, short skirts, and a tight blouse, boasted of her relationship with men, and was always in conflict with Martin, Gina, and Pam.<sup>34</sup> Sheneneh had characteristics of Sapphire, Oriole, and a B-Girl. However, a Sheneneh character is obnoxious, uncouth, fully knowledgeable of street culture, and lacking in the social sophistication of most educated, middle-class blacks.

Bernie Mac (as Bernie) and Kellita Smith (as Wanda) in *The Bernie Mac Show* (season 3).



FOX/Photofest

In very stereotypical terms, Sheneneh is “too black,” a “ghetto homegirl.”<sup>35</sup> This stereotype was also seen in the sitcom series *In the House*.

From 1990 to the present, some stereotypes of African Americans continued to be blatantly negative, as in the case of *Martin*, *Living Single*, *The Jamie Foxx Show*, and *The PJ's*, but others were more neutral. *Bernie Mac* (Fox, 2001–2006) is an example of a sitcom series that was more balanced in its portrayals of African Americans. *Bernie Mac* participated in the multiculturalist form of race humor with its innovative approaches to the television form in general, not particularly with its engagement of difference within televisual blackness.<sup>36</sup> *Bernie Mac* also operated within the pluralist discourse, where blacks and whites are just alike except for minor differences of habit and racial perspective and where blacks face the same experiences, situations, and conflicts as whites, except that they are separate from whites.<sup>37</sup>

The character of Bernie Mac is constructed as successful, materialistically affluent, and individualistic, like his eighties counterparts Benson DuBois in *Benson* (ABC, 1979–1986), George Jefferson in *The Jeffersons* (CBS,

1975–1985), and Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992). Just as with these earlier characters, themes of success and affluence define Bernie's representation as a new black male in television.<sup>38</sup> His living environment and lifestyle explicitly convey upper-middle-class status. Surpassing George and Cliff in material success, Bernie lives in a semi-mansion with wide hallways, spacious rooms, plush furniture, and abundant art objects and plants. Furthermore, he drives a luxury SUV. Bernie is not a white-collar professional such as George, Benson, and Cliff, but he is nevertheless a successful stand-up comedian living in Los Angeles. Whereas Benson and George were often seen in business suits, and Cliff in his medical coat and signature designer sweaters, Bernie wears loose-fitting silk shirts, wool-blend slacks, and jewelry.

Bernie's blackness and maleness are important facets of the show, but these traits are constructed mimetically. That is, Bernie is one of us, the viewers of the show—equally intelligent and equally able to control circumstances.<sup>39</sup> Like his 1970s and 1980s counterparts George and Cliff, Bernie does not ignore or disregard African American culture and its sensibilities. For example, in the episode “Bernie Mac, Ladies Man,” when Bernie and his friends are deciding who should help Vanessa create a costume for a seventies dance, Bernie says he should, because he was the one who put the “P” in P-funk, and he told “Earth and Wind” to get “Fire.” Both of these cultural references are to popular black bands of the seventies, Parliament and Earth, Wind, and Fire. However, Bernie Mac's blackness is not presented as the issue. Although Bernie is a black man, he is also a typical TV character representing certain values, norms, and beliefs seen repeatedly in American dramatic television over the last fifty years.<sup>40</sup>

For all intents and purposes, Bernie Mac has successfully assimilated into American society, and his experiences are just like anyone else's. His maleness and blackness is naturalized to the point of being cast as a normal part of everyday life—and, therefore, so too are his situations, dilemmas, and experiences. For example, in the same episode, Bernie questions his masculinity after spending the afternoon with three spouses of Wanda's coworkers. This is further exaggerated when, at the company picnic, Wanda's boss comments on the fact that Bernie is a “stay-at-home dad” and minimizes Bernie's stand-up comedy career. Bernie politely objects to this evaluation of his life. However, since he cannot effectively convey to Wanda's boss how he feels, Bernie Mac excuses himself to get some food. The dilemma is resolved when Bernie visits Mama Kim's nail salon. She and Papa Kim tell him, “You're a strong black man, Bernie Mac. Just be yourself.” Indeed he does.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter briefly documented African American stereotypes in prime-time black sitcoms from 1948 to the present. The representations of

blacks in television comedy today have changed significantly for the better. There has been an evolution of black portrayal in comedy from strict coon, Mammy, and Sapphire characters to stereotypes commonly designated for characters of European descent. Situation comedies such as *Bernie Mac*, *All of Us*, *Girlfriends*, and *Everybody Hates Chris* have contributed to this change with their innovative approaches to the television form and their restylings of African Americans in general and black males and black females in particular.

### BLACK SITUATION COMEDY VIDEOGRAPHY, 1948–PRESENT

1. *Laytons, The* (DuMont, August 11, 1948–October 13, 1948).
2. *Beulah Show, The* (ABC, October 3, 1950–September 22, 1953).
3. *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS, June 28, 1951–June 11, 1953).
4. *Julia* (NBC, September 17, 1968–May 25, 1971).
5. *Bill Cosby Show, The* (NBC, September 14, 1969–August 31, 1971).
6. *Barefoot in the Park* (ABC, September 24, 1970–January 14, 1971).
7. *Sanford and Son* (CBS, January 14, 1972–September 2, 1977).
8. *Roll Out!* (CBS, October 5, 1973–January 4, 1974).
9. *Good Times* (CBS, February 1, 1974–August 1, 1979).
10. *That's My Mama* (ABC, September 4, 1974–December 24, 1975).
11. *Jeffersons, The* (CBS, January 18, 1975–July 23, 1985).
12. *Grady* (NBC, December 4, 1975–March 4, 1976).
13. *What's Happening!!* (ABC, August 5, 1976–April 28, 1979).
14. *Sanford Arms, The* (NBC, September 16, 1977–October 14, 1977).
15. *Baby, I'm Back* (CBS, January 30, 1978–August 12, 1978).
16. *Diff'rent Strokes* (NBC, November 3, 1978–August 30, 1986).
17. *Benson* (ABC, September 13, 1979–August 30, 1986).
18. *One in a Million* (ABC, January 8, 1980–June 23, 1980).
19. *Sanford* (CBS, March 15, 1980–July 10, 1981).
20. *Checking In* (CBS, April 9, 1981–April 30, 1981).
21. *Gimme a Break* (NBC, October 29, 1981–May 12, 1987).
22. *New Odd Couple, The* (ABC, October 1982–June 16, 1983).
23. *At Ease* (ABC, March 4, 1983–July 15, 1983).
24. *Webster* (ABC, September 16, 1983–September 11, 1987).
25. *Just Our Luck* (ABC, September 20, 1983–December 27, 1983).
26. *Cosby Show, The* (NBC, September 20, 1984–September 17, 1992).
27. *What's Happening Now!!* (syndicated, September 7, 1985–December 21, 1985).
28. *227* (NBC, September 14, 1985–July 28, 1990).
29. *Charlie and Co.* (ABC, September 18, 1985–July 23, 1986).
30. *He's the Mayor* (ABC, January 10, 1986–March 21, 1986).
31. *Redd Foxx Show, The* (ABC, January 18, 1986–April 19, 1986).

32. *Melba* (CBS, January 28, 1986–September 13, 1986).
33. *Amen* (NBC, September 27, 1986–July 27, 1991).
34. *Bustin' Loose* (syndicated, September 26, 1987–1988).
35. *Frank's Place* (CBS, September 14, 1987–October 1, 1988).
36. *Different World, A* (NBC, September 24, 1987–July 9, 1993).
37. *Robert Guillaume Show, The* (ABC, April 5, 1989–August 9, 1989).
38. *Family Matters* (ABC, September 22, 1989–May 9, 1997; CBS, September 19, 1997–July 17, 1998).
39. *Sugar and Spice* (CBS, March 30, 1990–May 25, 1990).
40. *New Attitude* (ABC, August 8, 1990–September 7, 1990).
41. *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, The* (NBC, September 10, 1990–September 9, 1996).
42. *You Take the Kids* (CBS, December 15, 1990–January 12, 1991).
43. *Roc* (Fox, August 24, 1991–August 30, 1994).
44. *Pacific Station* (NBC, September 15, 1991–January 3, 1992).
45. *Royal Family, The* (CBS, September 18, 1991–May 13, 1992).
46. *Teech* (NBC, September 18, 1991–October 16, 1991).
47. *Martin* (Fox, August 27, 1992–May 1, 1997).
48. *Here and Now* (NBC, September 19, 1992–January 2, 1993).
49. *Out All Night* (NBC, September 19, 1992–July 9, 1993).
50. *Hangin' With Mr. Cooper* (ABC, September 22, 1992–August 30, 1997).
51. *Rhythm and Blues* (NBC, September 24, 1992–October 22, 1992).
52. *Where I Live* (ABC, March 5, 1993–November 20, 1993).
53. *Living Single* (Fox, August 22, 1993–January 1, 1998).
54. *Tall Hopes* (CBS, August 25, 1993–September 8, 1993).
55. *Thea* (ABC, September 8, 1993–February 23, 1994).
56. *Sinbad Show, The* (Fox, September 16, 1993–July 28, 1994).
57. *George* (ABC, November 5, 1993–January 19, 1994).
58. *Sister, Sister* (ABC, April 1, 1994–June 7, 1995; WB, September 5, 1995–May 23, 1999).
59. *South Central* (Fox, April 5, 1994–August 30, 1994).
60. *704 Hauser* (CBS, April 11, 1994–May 9, 1994).
61. *On Our Own* (ABC, September 13, 1994–April 14, 1995).
62. *Me and the Boys* (ABC, September 20, 1994–August 2, 1995).
63. *My Brother and Me* (Nickelodeon, October 15, 1994–February 2, 1995).
64. *Wayans Bros., The* (WB, January 11, 1995–May 20, 1999).
65. *Parent 'Hood, The* (WB, January 18, 1995–July 25, 1999).
66. *In the House* (NBC, April 10, 1995–May 13, 1996; UPN, August 26, 1996–August 11, 1999).
67. *Preston Episodes, The* (Fox, September 9, 1995–October 28, 1995).
68. *Cleghorne!* (WB, September 10, 1995–January 28, 1996).

69. *Minor Adjustments* (NBC, September 16, 1995–November 26, 1995; UPN, January 23, 1996–June 4, 1996).
70. *Moesha* (UPN, January 23, 1996–May 14, 2001).
71. *Show, The* (Fox, March 17, 1996–June 6, 1996).
72. *Kenan and Kel* (Nickelodeon, August 17, 1996–April 1, 2000).
73. *Steve Harvey Show, The* (WB, August 25, 1996–February 17, 2002).
74. *Malcolm and Eddie* (UPN, August 26, 1996–May 22, 2000).
75. *Goode Behavior* (UPN, August 26, 1996–August 4, 1997).
76. *Sparks* (UPN, August 26, 1996–August 31, 1998).
77. *Homeboys in Outer Space* (UPN, August 27, 1996–June 24, 1997).
78. *Jamie Foxx Show, The* (WB, August 28, 1996–January 14, 2001).
79. *Cosby* (CBS, September 16, 1996–April 28, 2000).
80. *Claude's Crib* (USA, January 5, 1997–March 2, 1997).
81. *Arsenio* (ABC, March 5, 1997–April 9, 1997).
82. *Smart Guy* (WB, March 26, 1997–May 16, 1999).
83. *Good News* (UPN, August 25, 1997–August 31, 1998).
84. *Between Brothers* (Fox, September 11, 1997–January 29, 1998; UPN, February 9, 1999–March 2, 1999).
85. *Gregory Hines Show, The* (CBS, September 15, 1997–March 6, 1998).
86. *Built to Last* (NBC, September 24, 1997–October 15, 1997).
87. *For Your Love* (NBC, March 17, 1998–May 5, 1998; WB, September 17, 1998–August 11, 2002).
88. *Damon* (Fox, March 22, 1998–July 20, 1998).
89. *Getting Personal* (Fox, April 6, 1998–October 16, 1998).
90. *Linc's* (Showtime, August 1, 1998–February 13, 2000).
91. *Hughleys, The* (ABC, September 22, 1998–April 28, 2000; UPN, September 11, 2000–May 20, 2002).
92. *PJ's, The* (Fox, January 10, 1999–May 18, 1999, December 17, 1999, and May 30, 2000–September 5, 2000; WB, October 8, 2000–May 20, 2001).
93. *Parkers, The* (UPN, August 30, 1999–May 10, 2004).
94. *Girlfriends* (UPN, September 11, 2000–May 8, 2006; CW, October 1, 2006–present).
95. *My Wife and Kids* (ABC, March 28, 2001–May 15, 2005).
96. *One on One* (UPN, September 3, 2001–May 15, 2006).
97. *Proud Family, The* (DSNY, September 15, 2001–August 19, 2005).
98. *Bernie Mac Show, The* (Fox, November 14, 2001–April 14, 2006).
99. *Half and Half* (UPN, September 23, 2002–May 15, 2006).
100. *Abby* (UPN, January 6, 2003–March 4, 2003).
101. *That's So Raven* (DSNY, January 17, 2003–present).
102. *Wanda at Large* (Fox, March 26, 2003–November 7, 2003).
103. *Whoopi* (NBC, September 9, 2003–April 20, 2004).
104. *All About the Andersons* (WB, September 12, 2003–February 12, 2004).



105. *Eve* (UPN, September 15, 2003–May 11, 2006).
106. *All of Us* (UPN, September 16, 2003–May 15, 2006; CW, October 1, 2006–present).
107. *Tracy Morgan Show, The* (NBC, December 2, 2003–March 20, 2004).
108. *Big House* (ABC, April 2, 2004–April 30, 2004).
109. *Method and Red* (Fox, June 16, 2004–September 15, 2004).
110. *Second Time Around* (UPN, September 20, 2004–January 24, 2005).
111. *Cuts* (UPN, February 14, 2005–May 11, 2006).
112. *Barbershop* (Showtime, August 14, 2005–October 16, 2005).
113. *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN, September 22, 2005–May 11, 2006; CW, October 1, 2006–present).
114. *Tyler Perry's House of Payne* (TBS, June 6, 2007–present).

## NOTES

1. Stereotypes of blacks do appear in family drama, medical drama, action/crime drama, documentaries, soap operas, variety shows, advertising, made-for-TV movies, and sketch comedy. However, space does not permit the discussion of these TV genres. For lengthy discussions of the TV genre in general and these other genres mentioned above, see Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, *Split Image* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1993); Thomas A. Mascaro, "Shades of Black on *Homicide: Life on the Street*: Progress in Portrayals of African American Men," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 10–18; Thomas A. Mascaro, "Shades of Black on *Homicide: Life on the Street*: Advances and Retreats in Portrayals of African American Women," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 56–67; George M. Zinkhan, William J. Qualls, and Abhijit Biswas, "The Use of Blacks in Magazine and Television Advertising: 1946–1986," *Journalism Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 547–553; and Douglas Kellner, "Television Images, Codes, and Messages," *Televisions* 7, no. 4 (1980): 1–19.

2. See Cedric C. Clark, "Television and Social Controls: Some Observations on the Portrayals of Ethnic Minorities," *Television Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1969): 18–22; Thomas Cripps, "The Noble Black Savage: A Problem in the Politics of Television Art," *Journal of Popular Culture* 8, no. 4 (Spring 1975): 687–695; Gordon L. Berry, "Television and Afro-Americans: Past Legacy and Present Portrayals," in *Television and Social Behavior: Beyond Violence and Children*, eds. Stephen B. Withey and Ronald B. Abeles (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980), 231–248; J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1992); Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993); Herman S. Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Angela M. S. Nelson, "Black Situation Comedies and the Politics of Television Art," in *Cultural Diversity and the U.S. Media*, eds. Yahya R. Kamalipour and Theresa Carilli (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 79–87.

3. See Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface*

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4. See John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (April 1933): 179–203; and George M. Fredrickson, *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

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8. See Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (April 1933): 179–203; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*; and Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Encyclopedia*.

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12. Henry T. Sampson, *That's Enough, Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900–1960* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1998), 3.

13. Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Radio Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 31.

14. Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Fireside, 1989), 19–20.

15. Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7–8.

16. Arthur Hough, "Trials and Tribulations—Thirty Years of Sitcom," in *Understanding Television: Essays on Television as a Social and Cultural Force*, ed. Richard P. Adler (New York: Praeger Publishers/CBS Inc., 1981, 204).

17. David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 184.

18. See Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 3; and Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, 5.

19. In the action comedy, emphasis is on the physical action of the characters, rather than on their character development or handling of societal or cultural problems. Domestic comedies focus on the personal relationships of the characters—how they develop and mature and how they resolve emotional or moral dilemmas. Dramedies are the best mixture of the three elements: physical action, character development, and theme. Nevertheless dramedies emphasize such societal or cultural themes or problems as war, discrimination, crime, and racism. See Richard Francis Taflinger, "Sitcom: A Survey and Findings of Analysis of the Television Situation Comedy," Ph.D. diss. (Washington State University, 1980).

20. See J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1992) and Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001).

21. Gray, *Watching Race*, 76.

22. *Ibid.*, 75.

23. The first sitcom to feature a black maid on prime-time television was *The Laytons* (DuMont, August 11, 1948–October 13, 1948). Very little information is available about the show, but it was created for black actress Amanda Randolph, who was joined by white actress Vera Tatum. It had been previously seen as a local program in New York in May and June 1948. The DuMont Network did not have full-scale network operations until January 11, 1949, when the East-to-Midwest cables were put into service by AT&T. Prior to this time, coverage was relatively limited and schedules were sporadic; very little documentation is available regarding the programming of DuMont Network. *Billboard* reported in July 1943 that up to that time, DuMont was producing Tuesday-night shows in cooperation with advertising agencies that wanted to make use of the new television facilities to experiment with the new medium. Perhaps *The Laytons* was produced in cooperation with DuMont and other various advertising agencies. Because the show was seen in New York that previous summer, it is also possible that a local television station in New York could have produced, directed, and written the

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show. See Gary Newton Hess, *An Historical Study of the Du Mont Television Network* (New York: Arno Press, 1979) for detailed information about the DuMont Network.

24. MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 117.

25. Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 278.

26. *Ibid.*, 279–280.

27. Gray, *Watching Race*, 85.

28. Clark, *Television and Social Controls*, 20.

29. MacDonald, 117–118.

30. Gray, *Watching Race*, 87.

31. MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 181.

32. Gray, *Watching Race*, 90.

33. Gordon L. Berry, “Television and Afro-Americans: Past Legacy and Present Portrayals,” in *Television and Social Behavior: Beyond Violence and Children*, eds. Stephen B. Withey and Ronald B. Abeles (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980), 240.

34. Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 419.

35. Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53–64.

36. Gray, *Watching Race*, 90.

37. *Ibid.*, 87.

38. Herman S. Gray, “Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy,” *Media, Culture and Society* 8 (1986): 228–230.

39. James W. Chesebro, “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series—A Four-Year Assessment,” in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 21.

40. *Ibid.*, 29.

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## The Black Situation Comedy

*Bambi Haggins*

Throughout the history of American television, black actors and comics have found the greatest access to the entertainment mainstream through comedy. From the advent of television (1948) to the post-network era, the African American presence has occupied a prominent and problematic space. Within a genre with the potential to be broad and subtle, progressive and regressive, culturally specific and universal, the constructions of blackness on television have reveled in and revealed the potential power of the medium and its impact on mainstream American popular consciousness. As Darrell Hamamoto aptly notes, “The television situation comedy—the most popular American artform—is a virtual textbook that can be ‘read’ to help lay bare the mores, images, ideals, prejudices and ideologies shared—whether by fiat or default—by the majority of the American public.”<sup>1</sup>

When one surveys the black-oriented (or black-centered) situation comedies, the spectrum reveals more variation than might initially be anticipated: some are rooted in the techniques of old or new minstrelsy, or both; some are tied inextricably to the myths of yearning for (separate but not often equal) American dreams; and others parlay in comedic critique designed to take both of the former to task. Through close readings of a variety of sitcom scripts from the past six decades—some emblematic of the era in which they were produced, and others that act as noteworthy anomalies—one begins to see how the struggle to construct, control, and contain the cultural production of blackness reflects and refracts the African American condition. These close readings also reveal how powerful a weekly prime-time slot can be in shaping a nation’s understanding of a people—particularly for the generations of American media babies who have grown up warming themselves at television’s electronic hearth.

## IN THE BEGINNING: BEULAH, KINGFISH AND THE SMALL SCREEN'S TAKE ON THE HAPPY DARKY

Arguably the situation comedy can be viewed as an overdetermined cultural artifact, with each series simultaneously producing and reflecting trends in American society. The fifties' domestic comedies, those televisual iterations of suburban bliss, had only one acceptable place for black Americans: in the kitchen. As Herman Gray asserts, "In the televisual world of the early fifties, the social and cultural rules of race relations were explicit; black otherness was required for white subjectivity; blacks and whites occupied separate and unequal worlds; black labor was always in the service of white domesticity . . . black humor was necessary for the amusement of whites."<sup>2</sup>

*Beulah* supplied all the ingredients for a good old-fashioned minstrel show. Beulah served as the personification of the happy darky domestic, with her childlike idiot friend, Oriole, as a queen-sized pickaninny and her beau, Bill, as a conflation of the coon and the Tom: the black working man who avoided work and responsibility but did a good Uncle Remus when the white folks were around. It seems mind-boggling that this series did not inspire the same ire in the black middle class (in the form of the NAACP) that was directed at *Amos 'n' Andy*.

Three actors played Beulah, each of whom had to varying degrees been relegated to Mammy roles: veteran performer Ethel Waters, who originated the role (1950–1952); Scarlet O'Hara's Mammy, Hattie MacDaniel (for six episodes); and finally, by Louise Beavers, a classically trained actress who left the show in 1953 while it was still highly rated. The image of the Mammy seems crafted to both undermine and underscore the role played by African American women. The fact that black women, either by default (as single parents) or by design (as a familial tradition), have been the very foundation of reassurance and stability in black lives and struggles has been co-opted. In *Beulah*, the needs and desires of black women are erased (as is the existence of their homes and families). But for the most part, the same folks in the black bourgeoisie, who bitterly condemned *Amos 'n' Andy*, just didn't have as much of a problem with *Beulah*.

In reality, the problem with *Amos 'n' Andy* was the domination of the stereotypical characters Kingfish and Andy. The conniving and ridiculous Kingfish, with his butchering of the English language (misspeaking) and his constant embellishing (whether for profit or self-aggrandizement), along with the good-hearted, but essentially shiftless Andy (whose shortcuts to the good life are always unsuccessful) were the focus of the episodes. The shrewish behavior of the most central female character, Sapphire (Kingfish's wife), acted as narrative garnish. Middle-class values are embodied in levelheaded Amos, who, along with his rarely seen wife, Ruby, get little airtime—and are no closer to getting their piece of the American dream than are Kingfish or Andy.

The NAACP campaign to remove the show was eventually successful in 1953, when longtime sponsor Blatz Beer pulled out. Despite the racist and stereotypical representations of African Americans that appeared in *Amos 'n' Andy*, “many poor, working class and even middle-class blacks still managed to read against the dominant discourse of whiteness and find humor in the show . . . [but] . . . tastes pleasures and voices in support of the show were drowned out by the moral outrage of middle-class blacks.”<sup>3</sup> In addition *Amos 'n' Andy* played into the “separate but equal” discourse that showed a hermetically sealed community of color where blacks were sampling the good life—even if they were not the central characters. Alvin Childress, who played Amos, defended the series: “I didn’t feel it harmed Negroes at all . . . Actually the series had many episodes that showed the Negro with many professions and business like attorneys, store owners and so on, which they had never had in TV or movies before.”<sup>4</sup>

The utilization of the minstrel archetypes in the early years of the electronic hearth is not surprising. Both *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* were carry-overs from radio—the former being the colorized version of the radio show that had been performed by Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, the white creators of the series; and the latter as a spin-off of *Fibber McGee and Molly*. Neither of these series were going after a black audience share—the minstrel archetypes were deliberate and designed to amuse and comfort the new medium’s predominantly white audience. One might contend that *Amos 'n' Andy* upset the sensibilities of the black middle class not only because it put black faces in narrative blackface, but also because this televisual minstrel show was set in Harlem—which, even in the early fifties, retained the veneer of a golden age of the black intelligentsia.

By the mid-fifties, the numbers of black faces on entertainment television had dwindled. After network news coverage of the Little Rock Nine, as the first integrated students were called, beginning school (with National Guardsmen as escorts) in 1954, American audiences began seeing images of black men, women and children who bore no resemblance to the coon, mammy, or pickaninny. As James Baldwin asserted in “Many Thousands Gone” (1951), “. . . Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead, their places taken by a group of amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, but ferociously literate, well-dressed and scrubbed.”<sup>5</sup> Baldwin’s description of this simultaneously progressive and problematic shift in the politics of black representation was apparent as television began to catch up in the mid-sixties.

## THE LATE SIXTIES: JULIA, THE BILL COSBY SHOW, AND THE SUPER NEGRO

In 1965 Bill Cosby’s breakthrough role as Alexander Scott in the buddy-espionage series *I-Spy* provided the embodiment of the well-dressed, well-educated, and extremely articulate Super Negro. In the same year that

Malcolm X was assassinated; that Watts burned; and that Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama, led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the affable and accessibly hip Cosby reflected and refracted the mid-sixties Camelot moment in style, if not substance, with the Cold Warrior superiority of Scott providing an ideological match with the liberalism of new frontier/great society rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> *I-Spy*'s integrated world—in which Scott was the color—remained popular throughout its three-year run. The decade that began with nonviolent struggle and Dr. King's vision of a new American dream (March on Washington, 1963) would come to a end with the Civil (and human) Rights visionary dead; the stoicism of the Civil Rights movement's nonviolent protest progressively replaced by cries of "Black power!" from both SNCC and the Black Panthers; and the gap between the African American condition and that of Anglo Americans ever widening. When *I-Spy* ended, the promises for an integrated America, a consistent subtext in the series, remained unfulfilled; the construction of the Super Negro was suspect.

Although glimpses of comfortably contained social relevance might be found in some dramatic programming (in the infamously uneventful episode of *Dragnet* dealing with the lack of violence in Los Angeles after the assassination of MLK or with the presence of Linc and the very special "black issues" episodes in the hipster cop show *The Mod Squad*), the situation comedy took little notice of the massive social unrest of the era. Inspired by a speech by Ralph Bunche, then the president of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), at a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) luncheon, television writer and producer Hal Kanter, formerly a writer for the radio version of *Beulah*, pitched a sitcom to NBC that would star an African American: enter Julia Baker (Diahann Carroll). In the series, Carroll's war widow moved to Los Angeles to build a new life with her son, Corey (Marc Copage) following the death of her husband in a helicopter crash in Vietnam. In the workplace and at home, Julia and Corey quickly assimilated into a supposedly integrated world—which, in actuality, was almost completely white, and included white neighbors, the Waggedorn family (ditzzy mother, Marie; the innocuous, nice guy of a father, Len, who was with the LAPD; and Earl J. Waggedorn, their son, who became Corey's best friend) and the curmudgeonly but kindhearted Dr. Chegley and spirited spinster co-worker Hannah Yarby, both of whom work at the medical office of an aerospace company. Julia was the antithesis of the various iterations of Mammies that predominated television's construction of black women: Julia, the beautiful and extremely stylish caramel-colored madonna, represented the female version of the Super Negro.

*Julia* was not without its detractors—who in the end would include Carroll, who would later bemoan the construction of Julia as a "white negro"

with “very little negro-ness.” *Julia*’s creators and network executives claimed the show was progressive, but this view was mitigated by the unproblematic view of the death of the war-hero father (at a time when the Vietnam War was a national point of contestation), the subsequent lack of a black male presence (other than *Julia*’s occasional suitors), the Bakers’ decidedly middle-class lifestyle (on a nurse’s salary), and the absence of any genuine connection to either the black community or black culture. In a time when the Black Power movement was garnering support in urban America, the Bakers were Angelenos who never experienced a trace of racism. When race was acknowledged, it was presented in cute (and innocuous) ways exemplified by Corey’s conversation with Earl J. Waggedorn when he first meets his new pal’s mom:

Earl: Hey, your mother’s colored.

Corey: Yeah, so am I.

Earl: You are?!

The boys then roll around the couch, laughing uproariously at this new discovery.

*Julia* was still a highly rated series when Carroll chose to leave the show at the end of its second season. In this case, the burden of representation was too much for the series to bear. The construction of the Super Negro, the best and the brightest constructed so as not to challenge or threaten the American mainstream, no longer held the sway it once had. Nevertheless, the development of black characters with whom white (as well as black) audiences could feel comfortable was still a goal for NBC when they turned to someone who would become a fixture on the network (and who had long ago proven his universalist marketability): Bill Cosby.

By 1969, when Cosby made his first foray into the world of the situation comedy, *The Bill Cosby Show*, his character, Chet Kincaid, the hipster teacher and coach, reconstructed the image of the Super Negro as an adult male who was young, gifted, and black. As Kincaid, Cosby represented a single black man in a community (coded as inner city) who espoused pragmatic, middle-class values (which he would reiterate over a decade later as the patriarch of the Huxtable clan). As the series followed Kincaid’s maturation (as teacher and coach, from single man to young married) and the challenges he faced engaging his students, their parents, and his colleagues, the sitcom presented a world that was neither idyllic nor problematic—which, when depicting an actually integrated milieu in 1969, was no small feat.

Like his hipster contemporary, Mr. Dixon of *Room 222*, Kincaid presented an educated black everyteacher who was afforded a personal life (with an attractive colleague as the love interest) and a sensibility far closer

to that of the students (and the popular cultural mainstream) than of his colleagues. However, unlike history teacher Mr. Dixon, who dealt with pressing social issues as best one could in the twenty-two minute precursor of the dramedy, Chet Kincaid rarely directly offered socially relevant, ideologically informed prescriptions. Through Chet, the audience learned object lessons that spoke across, rather than to, the times. As one might argue would be the case with *The Cosby Show*, the significance of the series was not necessarily the content of individual narratives but in the construction of both Cosby's sitcom persona and the televisual environment in which he existed. "In most episodes," as Donald Bogle observes, "... Cosby was interested in expressing—without simplifying—the important values, outlooks and norms of the new Black middle class," thus depicting "Black Americans who, in many respects, were not different than white Americans."<sup>7</sup>

During its run (1969–1971), *The Bill Cosby Show*, despite its aversion to directly addressing the sociopolitical milieu of the late sixties and early seventies, was not viewed as an extension of the Super Negro televisual representations of either Cosby's first television outing, *I-Spy*, or its sitcom contemporary, *Julia*. I believe this was achieved by making efforts to call subtle attention to blackness in its background and politics of representation, whether in Kincaid's commitment to his volunteerism at the inner-city community center, his eligible black bachelorhood and then happily married status, or the insertion of moments that depicted "very real and important differences that existed in the Black community, even if it merely be an aunt and uncle [played by Chitlin Circuit veterans Moms Mabley and Dewey "Pigmeat" Markam] shooting the dozens."<sup>8</sup> Although Cosby as Chet Kincaid played upon the already likable and accepted aspects of his comic persona, the less-than-super construction of the character failed to garner the widespread acclaim of his previous television stardom or the monumental success that would follow with his trek into fatherhood.

## THE SEVENTIES: *GOOD TIMES*, *THE JEFFERSONS*, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM, LOST AND FOUND

In the 1970s, amid the emergence of jiggle TV (*Three's Company*), innocuous (and dated) constructions of family bliss (*The Brady Bunch*) and the ensemble comedies of the workplace (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Barney Miller*), a relatively small group of situation comedies directly engaged racism, poverty, urban violence, crime, and myriad forms of discrimination; the majority of them were created or produced by Norman Lear and/or Bud Yorkin. The comic conventions of these social sitcoms were not the creations of Lear and Yorkin; both *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son* were adapted from the popular British series *Till Death Do Us*

*Part* and *Steptoe and Son*, respectively). However, series made under the banner of Tandem, Lear and Yorkin's joint production company (*All in the Family* and *Maude*), Lear's T.A.T (*The Jeffersons* and *Hot L. Baltimore*), or Yorkin's TOY productions (*What's Happening!!* and *Carter Country*) revised American audiences' expectations of what could be seen as funny in the contemporary sitcom.

By extending the boundaries of the most familiar television genre, the domestic comedy, although containing the social problems encountered in the episodes by resolving them *all in the family*, these series walked the comedic razor's edge between challenging an audience and playing to them—at least for part of their run. Such was certainly the case for CBS comedies *Good Times* (1974–1979) and *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985)—spin-offs from the omega of the Tandem sitcoms, *All in the Family*, Lear and Yorkin's most controversial and most successful show.<sup>9</sup>

*Good Times*, along with *The Jeffersons*, were two of the first television sitcoms on network television to feature a predominantly black cast since Blatz Beer had pulled its sponsorship for *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1953. Both series presented views of black America that had not been seen on television: two African American families on either end of the economic spectrum, with the Jeffersons in a deluxe apartment on New York's Upper East Side and

**Esther Rolle (as Florida Evans) and Jimmie Walker (as James "J. J." Evans, Jr.) in *Good Times*, 1974–1979.**



CBS/Photofest

*Good Times's* Evans family in the decidedly less luxurious two-bedroom apartment in a Cabrini Green–like housing project. The latter show inspired a string of series that emulated it in style, if not substance.

In *Good Times*, created by two black writers, Eric Monte and Mike Evans (the once and future Lionel on *The Jeffersons*), and produced by Norman Lear, the construction of the Evans family confronted notions that the road out of poverty required only the desire and the drive to navigate it. Upon the insistence of Esther Rolle, who reprised her role as Florida from the Tandem series *Maude*, the Evans family was a nuclear family. Acting as counterpoint to the happy, relation-free domestics of series such as *Beulah*, *Good Times* focused on the family of a woman who did “day work.”

The series premiere revealed its potential: the family faced eviction because of the cost incurred when Florida required surgery, despite the fact that the father, James (played by John Amos), worked multiple minimum-wage jobs. As James, serving as the voice of the every (black) man, ranted about unemployment, low wages, urban decay, and so on, it resonated for those who knew all too well that the war on poverty had been lost. Flouting the previous sitcom assertions that the desire to achieve would result in success, the Evans became the first family on television since the Kramdens (*The Honeymooners*) to even acknowledge economic struggle.

The light sitcom fare of sibling rivalry—between the eldest, J. J. (Jimmie Walker), the aspiring artist and wannabe hustler; the daughter, Thelma (BernNadette Stanis), who cultivated her beauty and her snaps; and the youngest, Michael, the genius and black nationalist committed to bringing power to the people—was supplemented by the humorous engagement of the realities of life in America's underclass. Their neighbor, Willona (Ja'net Du Bois), a fortysomething divorcee who provided comic relief with the travails of being a single middle-aged woman, managed to balance verbal sparring with James and deep abiding friendship with Florida (later in the run, she acted as the temporary guardian to the children). Early in its run, *Good Times* skillfully integrated relevancy and realism into the sitcom narrative; in fact, the series portrayed an African American family just trying to get by in the ghetto with, arguably, a greater measure of realism than any network situation comedy before or since.

During an era of scandal (Watergate), the psychic and political costs of losing the wars on poverty and in Vietnam, the staggeringly high inflation rate, and skyrocketing unemployment, *Good Times's* initial success was rooted in the audience's ability to identify with the experience of facing very realistic hardships but persevering as a family. In addition, the portrayal of James and Florida as parents who embraced their responsibility to teach traditional morals and values to their children celebrated the notion of a nuclear family that had heretofore been fundamentally absent from the small screen.



Yet the nuanced representations of the black family began to recede in the face of a catchphrase: “DY-NO-MITE!” As the character of the eldest son morphed from an aspiring artist and jive-talking teen to a seventies version of the coon, complete with toothy grin, Sambo-esque strut, and bug-eyed mugging, the accolades from the first few seasons were more than matched by criticism from within the black community—as well as within the cast. James’s struggle for gainful employment, Michael’s academic talents and Black Power discourse, and Thelma’s character, in general, faded into the background as “DY-NO-MITE!” merchandise, including folders, T-shirts, and lunch pails, appeared. J. J. became the show’s central player, and his lies, schemes, and questionable grasp of the English language became the focus of the comedy (though some audience members weren’t laughing); the tenets of realism and family values were lost.

Both Rolle and Amos left the series in a narrative turn that seemed a punitive measure for the characters and the actors: James was killed on the way home after securing a job in the South that would enable him to provide for the family (making it impossible for Amos to even consider returning), and Florida’s mourning period for the love of her life was cut short when she met and married a man—and left her children behind. When Rolle was coaxed into returning for the final season, the marriage (and her abandonment of her children) was ignored—as if they had never happened.

One might argue that a series that began with such great potential to provide a view of life in urban America that was both accessible and as realistic as a sitcom could be was destined to become victim of its own success; it is much easier to generate derisive laughter (with the coining of J. J.) than to maintain the delicate balance between humor and pathos.

The ABC sitcoms set in the ghetto that emerged in the wake of *Good Times*’s success—*What’s Happening!!* (1976–1979, produced by Bud Yorkin’s TOY Productions) and *That’s My Mama* (1974–1975)—focused not on social issues, but rather on black cultural style, often relying on stock characters instead of more nuanced constructions of blackness. Many older stereotypical tropes of blackness, rejuvenated on *Good Times*, can be seen in *What’s Happening!!* (*WH*) and *That’s My Mama* (*TMM*) in varying degrees of intensity. Different iterations on the smart guy (Michael) can be seen in both the book-smart, street-simple, aspiring writer, Raj (*WH*) and the barber businessman and player, Clifton (*TMM*). The sharp, sassy, and antagonistic sister and/or friend type, the Thelma/Willona, are played out in the constructions of Dee, the preteen queen of snaps, and Shirley, the wisecracking and world-weary waitress, on *WH*. The pudgy, “locking,” childlike Rerun in *WH* (“Hey, heeeey, hey!”) and the jive-talking, strutting, and spinning Junior in *TMM* (“Ooooooooooh-wheel!”) act as the J. J. in their respective series—as the character who often literally dances or prances to deliver his quasi-culturally coded catchphrase. There is also the zaftig Big Mama, who can channel

Beulah, Sapphire, and Aunt Esther (*Sanford and Son*): deeply religious, fiercely protective, and not above using the threat of the switch or the belt, the Mamas of *What's Happening* and *That's My Mama* are related to Florida, but differ in fundamental ways—not the least of which is their status as single mothers. In these ghetto sitcoms, television's construction of the fatherless black family returned; their narratives supplied no James equivalent.

In many ways, these series began their run in the narrative space into which *Good Times* had veered after its initial directive as a social sitcom. With ghetto life pastoralized in television fictions set in Chicago's South Side, Washington, DC, and South Central Los Angeles during the days of recession and rampant unemployment (and on the cusp of the crack epidemic), the potential of these series to humanize and personalize a particular black urban experience was lost. Whether one can blame the missed opportunity on the cynical motivations of television as a commercial medium (catchphrases sell) or on the shift in taste in the waning days of liberalism and the dawn of the Reagan era, the ghetto/social sitcom took black television representation two steps forward and one step back.

**Sherman Hemsley (as George Jefferson) and Isabel Sanford (as Louise Jefferson) in *The Jeffersons*, 1975–1985.**



CBS/Photofest

At the close of the seventies, the television landscape of black comedy had shifted from the underclass to tales of uplift. In the Norman Lear-produced show *The Jeffersons* “movin’ on up” meant living comfortably in the upper middle class—and fundamentally apart from the black community. *The Jeffersons* was a Horatio Alger story featuring the patriarch, George (Sherman Helmsley), the newly crowned dry-cleaning king with a Napoleon complex (and as much intolerance as his former neighbor, Archie Bunker); the long-suffering wife, Louise (aka “Weezy”), played by Isabel Sanford, who spends the lion’s share of her time apologizing for her husband; and son Lionel (Mike Evans/Damon Evans), who adjusted most easily to their movement from a working-class existence to the consumption and privilege of a predominantly white world. The Jeffersons were kept “real” by their live-in maid, Florence (Marla Gibbs), who traded barbs with George (making fun of his lack of height and excess of ego) with not a trace of happy subservience in her character construction. When *The Jeffersons* engaged issues of intolerance, discrimination, or economic disparity, it did so from a place of privilege that seemed to foreshadow (and then echo) the yuppie/buppie ethos of the eighties: it isn’t about black or white—it is about green. George constantly puts down their upstairs neighbors (the overly tolerant white husband, Tom, and the feisty and sophisticated black wife, Helen Willis—the first black/white inter-racial couple on a network series, played by Franklin Cover and Roxie Roker) and voices his disapproval about Lionel’s relationship with the neighbors’ daughter, Jenny (Berlinda Tolbert). Strutting with pride over his nouveau-riche status, George embodied and employed the trickle-down economic values of Reagan-era America, as well as an “I got mine,” up-by-your-bootstraps ideology that was simultaneously mocked and celebrated in this version of a social sitcom.

### THE EIGHTIES: BLACK LIKE WHOM? *THE COSBY SHOW* AND *FRANK’S PLACE*

In the eighties, the gift of Reaganomics was the ever-expanding gap between rich and poor, and poverty among blacks reached an all-time high. The crack epidemic (another eighties phenomenon) was accompanied by the expansion of violence (gang- and drug-related), wreaking havoc in urban black America. In the same era when Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday was established as a national holiday and Jesse Jackson’s run for the presidency seemed to act as testament to how far we had come in the struggle for Civil Rights, the incarceration of black men rose to then-record numbers. It was the era in which a black man became a television icon, and millions of viewers (foreign and domestic) tuned in every week to see a colorized vision of the American dream.

Sabrina Le Beauf (as Sondra), Malcolm-Jamal Warner (as Theo), Bill Cosby (as Cliff), Keshia Knight Pulliam (as Rudy), Tempestt Bledsoe (as Vanessa), Lisa Bonet (as Denise), and Phylicia Ayres-Allen (as Clair) in *The Cosby Show*, 1984–1992.



NBC/Photofest

*The Cosby Show*, scheduled by NBC on Thursday evening as Must-See TV, established for Cosby another significant place in television history. Throughout his comic career, Cosby has occupied a unique position in which his comedic articulation of blackness is viewed as both representative and idiosyncratic.

Although, given the wealth of material written about *The Cosby Show*, the inclusion of this analysis seems a bit like a scholarly attempt to reinvent the wheel, one would be remiss not to discuss the character that made Cosby a television icon: Heathcliff Huxtable. The series depiction of the Huxtable family continued the “movin’ on up” trend of blacks in sitcoms of the late seventies and early eighties (*The Jeffersons*, *Diff’rent Strokes*, *Benson*). Unlike in its predecessors, however, for whom “movin’ on up” meant moving into a fundamentally white world, the world of the Huxtables was primarily black, and the series began with the family as long-standing members of the upper middle class.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, the series was a direct reflection of the universalist sensibility that has informed Cosby’s stand-up from his first appearance on *The Jack Paar Program* in 1963 to his 2004 stand-up tour. The picture of upper-middle-class success, Cosby’s obstetrician and father Cliff and lawyer and wife Clair (Phylicia Rashad), along with their three (then four) daughters and one son, constructed a new poster family for the American dream—one easily embraced by the viewing public, because, as Herman Gray states, “it is a middle class family that happens to be Black.”<sup>11</sup>

*The Cosby Show's* premiere was one of the most successful translations of a comic's stand-up act into the sitcom format. Cliff and the kids—particularly Vanessa (Tempestt Bledsoe), the middle child, labeled “the informer” in Cosby's stand-up—spoke dialogue cribbed from the *Himself* performances. Just as significant, from its first episode in 1984, *The Cosby Show* forwarded the traditional “family values” (the catchphrase of the era) and a notion of uplift informed by the Civil Rights era—conveying both more as individual wisdom than as ideological agenda in much the same way that, until recently, Cosby, both onstage and in other public venues, had espoused.

Throughout its run, Cosby retained tight creative control. He brought psychiatrist and cultural critic Alvin F. Poussaint, a longtime friend, on board as a consultant, because Cosby “wanted the show to be real, the psychological interactions of the family to be real. And he wanted the issues to be real issues, universal to families.”<sup>12</sup> The black bourgeois setting of the series did not preclude dealing with social issues facing the African American community, but it facilitated presentations of *situations* common to the domestic comedy and far more closely akin to the Stone family in *The Donna Reed Show* than the Evans family in *Good Times*.<sup>13</sup> Arguably, the most direct narrative tip of the hat to class disparity came early in the series: in one episode from the third season, Vanessa gets into a fight with a girl who calls her “rich.” Cliff explains, “Your mother and I are rich. You have nothing.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Cosby, as creative producer of the series as well as its star, remained adamant that sociopolitical issues (namely, race relations) need not be a part of the narrative: “It may seem that I'm an authority because my skin color gives me a mark of a victim. But that's not a true label. I won't deal with the foolishness of racial overtones on the show. I base an awful lot of what I've done simply on what people will enjoy.”<sup>15</sup>

“And So We Commence,” the series finale, which culminates with Theo's graduation from NYU, aired on April 30, 1992, with news coverage of the LA uprising acting as its lead-in. Although the irony of the televisual saga of the country's most fully assimilated African American family (with its depiction of black access to the American dream) ending at the same historical moment when images of the explosion of racial tensions and Los Angeles burning is lost on no one, one must also question how much the “*positive imagined*” of the Huxtable world had to do with the actual state of race relations in the United States.”<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless the televisual translation of Cosby's comic persona transformed him into America's dad—a position that continues to endow the television icon's voice with immense cultural cachet (and attract enormous media attention). Within his function as America's dad, Cosby/Cliff passes on a particular value system—the familial guidelines for access to the dream—within the trials and tribulations of the televisual family. In

addition, great pains are taken to make sure that the next generation learns these lessons and lives by them: the assurance that their post-Civil Rights era offspring know what is expected of them and what is desired for them is a dominant theme, with object lessons drenched in ideologies of education, uplift, personal responsibility, and pragmatism.

During the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* presented an idealized notion of a black upper-middle-class experience—a colorized iteration of the American dream. When *Frank's Place* appeared on the CBS fall lineup, it marked a departure for the sitcom, as well as black television representation: it was, arguably, the first half-hour dramedy and one of the first prime-time series to attempt to capture black life in the South. Set in New Orleans, the series won great critical acclaim for its use of sitcom conventions to provide nuanced social critique that was both funny and moving.

Developed by Hugh Wilson and Tim Reid (a sitcom veteran best known for his role as Venus Flytrap, the funkified soulster evening disc jockey, on *WKRP in Cincinnati*), the series chronicled the life of Frank Parrish, a fully assimilated black academic from the East Coast who becomes the proprietor of the New Orleans restaurant after the death of his long-estranged father.

The series could have simply become a fish-out-of-water comedy; however, it actively shunned the broad physical humor and the “three jokes per page” logic of many sitcoms. As such, the comedy based its humor in the Ivy League-educated, Boston-bred Frank’s discovery of the richly complex culture of his father’s New Orleans and black working-class life. The world of his late father’s Creole restaurant, *Chez Louisiane*, provides Frank with a community—indeed, an extended family.

The integrated ensemble cast included Miss Marie (Frances E. Williams), whose senior status and staff seniority accords her both respect and privilege (she only waits on folks who have been customers for at least twenty years); Anna-May (Francesca P. Roberts), the head waitress, who always provides the intellectually sophisticated but pragmatically challenged Frank with her opinions; Big Arthur (Tony Burton), the master chef, who rules his kitchen with a soft touch and an iron hand; Shorty La Roux (Don Yesso), the white assistant chef, whose culinary talents are in the fledgling stages; Tiger Shepin (Charles Lampkin), the bartender/surrogate father, upon whose wisdom and approval Frank comes to depend; and Cool Charles (William Thomas Jr.), Frank’s enthusiastic, if not always able, young helper; Hanna Griffin (played by Daphne Maxwell Reid), a local mortician from a prominent black family, who becomes Frank’s love interest; Bubba Weisberger (Robert Harper), a white Jewish lawyer from an old Southern family (and a fixture at the bar), who handles Frank’s legal affairs at *Chez Louisiane* (as he had for Frank’s father before him); and Rev. Deal (Lincoln Kilpatrick), a congregation-less preacher, who seeks a church or any other opportunity from his barstool.

Even as Frank inquires about the light crowd in the Chez on his first night in New Orleans, his inability to clearly connect issues of class *and* race makes the intellectual seem, at best, naïve, and at worst, indifferent. In response to Frank's query, Tiger explains that their clientele are working people who eat at home during the week—and, of course, "white folks don't come to come into the neighborhood at night." These notions simply had not occurred to Frank.

Shot on film without a laugh track, *Frank's Place* did not look or sound like any other sitcom on television, which is not always a good thing in terms of network programming. In aesthetic and narrative terms, the strengths of *Frank's Place* also contributed to its one-season tenure. The cinematic aesthetics of the series were costly, and the innovative desire to let the narrative of each individual episode dictate its style (the ratio of comedy to drama) puzzled many viewers. As the third-ranked network, CBS hungered for an instant hit, not a serious endeavor that needed to build a generic taste culture as well as an audience. In addition, because of the frequent scheduling changes, those intrigued with the buzz surrounding *Frank's Place* might not have been able to find it on the prime-time schedule. The cancellation of the series at the end of its freshman season marked the loss of a genuine opportunity to explore a previously ignored slice of black life—and to provide humor based in complicating notions of black identities by recognizing the roles of history, class, and region. By the beginning of the nineties, the phrases "subtle humor" and "black sitcoms" seemed mutually exclusive.

## THE NINETIES: THE HUGHLEYS AND THE NETLET BLACK BLOCKS

The stand-up boom of the 1990s had a profound effect on the black comic's access to the sitcom. The result was the unprecedented flow of talent into cable comedy programs, netlet programming, and network programming in the early nineties—that's the good news *and* the bad news. As a result of cable series such as *Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam* on HBO and BET's *Comic View*, which aired at the forefront of the stand-up boom and gave much-needed national exposure to the hordes of young black comics inspired by the work (and the high-profile successes) of Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, Robert Townsend, and Keenen Ivory Wayans, Hollywood's new Black Pack. One might even assert that before *Def Jam*, a majority of black comics could not get enough exposure to attract network attention; the show was pitched to a narrow audience of comedy, but HBO, in particular, afforded a national stage.

*Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam* (1992–1997), the brainchild of hip-hop impresario Simmons, offered a venue for stand-up comedy that spoke to an emergent black cultural moment: when hip-hop slowly but surely moved

from the fringes of American popular consciousness toward the center. What emerged from this black comic space was a *Def Comedy Jam* persona—the embodiment of the comedic conventions that moved from the main stages of black comedy clubs to the niched market of a mainstream venue, HBO.

Like the great nephews of Redd Foxx, the godchildren of Richard Pryor, and the kid brothers of Eddie Murphy, the *Def Jam* comics spoke in purposefully outrageous tones during acts designed to challenge the limitations of what could be said on televisual main stages. The *Def Comedy Jam* ethos, driven as much by a “oh, no, he didn’t” sense of outlandish content as a comic self-determination, seemed intent upon flipping the script on the racial politics of comedic discourse. In this brave new comic world, the politics of racial differentiation were key in not simply bringing the periphery to the center, but shifting that center—making the margin the mainstream. Thus the litany of “white people be like” jokes acted not simply as a reversal, but rather as a mechanism for asserting that this is our world—at least in certain venues and certain media outlets.

The performers of *Def Comedy Jam*, from Martin Lawrence, Chris Tucker, and Eddie Griffin to future kings and queens of comedy (Cedric the Entertainer, Bernie Mac, Steve Harvey, D. L. Hughley and Adele Givens, and Miss Laura Hayes and Sommore, respectively), embodied bawdy (and often physical) humor that reached back beyond the Chitlin Circuit into the conventions of minstrelsy—tropes that have historically inflected mainstream comic representations of blackness.

The flood of black comics into the aforementioned cable venues (and the stand-up programs on Comedy Central after 1991), as well as their slow trickle into network/netlet television on series such as *Hanging with Mr. Cooper*, with D. C. Curry (ABC, 1992–1997) and *Martin* (Fox, 1992–1997), contributed to a (slightly) increased black presence on television—but only in comedy, of course. However, it was the netlet’s black-block programming strategies (first utilized by Fox and since adopted by both the WB and UPN) that reset the trajectory for numerous black comics. The 1998 WB Thursday night block (*The Wayans Bros.*, *The Jamie Foxx Show*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, and *For Your Love*) and the 2003 UPN lineup (*The Parkers*, with Mo’Nique; *One on One*, with Flex Alexander; *Girlfriends*; and *Half and Half*) mirrored the counterprogramming strategies used in the early nineties by the fledgling Fox netlet—exemplified by its Thursday night alternative to Must-See TV with *Martin*, *Living Single*, and *New York Undercover*. Initially, Fox had allowed series to defy conventional generic boundaries in comedy—as seen in the dysfunctional domestic comedy (domcom) *Married with Children*; the landmark animated series *The Simpsons*; and the colorized sketch comedy series that revitalized the variety genre, *In Living Color*. However, by the fall of 1998, all of those series (with



the exception of the flagship show, *The Simpsons*), as well as black-block comedies *Martin* and *Living Single*, were lost in the passage from netlet to network—from urban audience base to broader demographic. As Keenen Ivory Wayans noted, “Fox changed the course of Black television unintentionally. They didn’t go out to make Black shows, they went out to make alternative programming.”<sup>17</sup>

As the two rivals for the title of fifth network, WB and UPN have very similar practices, but they differ in terms of programming ethos. In 1998, the president of UPN at the time, Dean Valentine, maintained that any “network following a narrowcast is ultimately doomed to failure” and that broadcasters have a “social responsibility to court a wider audience . . . that there has to be something that brings America together and unites it.”<sup>18</sup> In sharp contrast, WB chief executive Jamie Kellner stated bluntly, “If you don’t focus on a certain group of people, I think you become unimportant to any group of people.”<sup>19</sup> In the past, the WB has used this philosophy to expand its viewer base—with teen-centered programming, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson’s Creek*, and *Felicity* (thereby moving ahead of UPN, toward fifth-network status). And despite UPN’s espoused position, both of the upstarts have looked toward comedy programming to open up the “urban” (read: nonwhite) audience. Both broadcasting entities have catered to black viewers, seeking to fill a niche not adequately served by the major networks—at least in terms of the sitcom. A. J. Jacobs’s prediction in his 1996 *Entertainment Weekly* article that “the bigger UPN and the WB get, the whiter they become” has certainly proven true for Fox: nearly three-fourths of their series programming has no black regulars.<sup>20</sup> As Robin Means-Coleman states,

Black situation comedy, as a more bigoted contribution to the racialized regime of representations, has a clear and definable history, from its theater minstrel roots to the most recent Neo-minstrelsy series, that reveals racial ridicule and buffoonery to be typical and representative . . . African Americans have much at stake as they encounter hyper-racial representations.<sup>21</sup>

Thus when the burden of perception (the way assumptions about blackness are depicted) is conflated with the burden of representation (the cultural and social weight of constructions of blackness), it becomes almost impossible for series to meet the expectations of audiences, critics, and networks for very long. One might argue that *The Hughleys* did better than most black situation comedies of the nineties. Among the many black-oriented series of the nineties, this series reflects multiple key factors in the development of black situation comedies of the 1990s. Hughley, a *Def Jam* veteran (and later a king of comedy), began his sitcom’s production history nestled

between ABC comedies on part of an integrated Wednesday of programming and ended its run on the only night of black-block programming left on television, Monday night on UPN (now the CW). Examination of *The Hughleys* reveals not only the changes in the content of black representation in the movement from network to netlet, but it also reveals how the concentration of media ownership (ABC/Disney) limits creative and representative options for the actor/creator/producer, as well as the spectator.

In an episode from *The Hughleys*' first season on ABC, "Why Can't We Be Friends?" the burden of perception placed upon blackness is addressed quite overtly. In this instance, the tolerant white neighbor must come to terms with the existence of racism in his social sphere just as the protagonist, the self-made businessman Darryl Hughley, must come to terms with the fact that middle-class status is not insulation against racism. After Dave (Eric Allan Kramer) takes Darryl and Milsap (John Henton) to his favorite local bar, an altercation ensues in absence when another local questions the source of Darryl's ability to live in this tony suburb—asserting the assumption that, if he is not an athlete or a rapper, Darryl must be into "pharmaceuticals." A verbal scrape ensues, and Dave returns to intervene just as the local is about to use a racial epithet. As the local departs, he offers to buy drinks for Milsap and Darryl, because he didn't know that they were with Dave.

Milsap (*angrily*): What difference does that make?

Darryl: No, I promised my wife I'd rob a liquor store on the way home.

Milsap: I'll go with you. Maybe I'll get my third strike so I can go see my daddy.

Despite the biting critique in that particular sequence, cocreator and star D. L. Hughley asserted that just because "You're black [doesn't mean] you always have to be making a political statement." In keeping, one might argue that the series can be seen as an updating of *The Jeffersons*—with Darryl as George, the neighbors as the Willises, and Milsap cast in Florence's role of reminding the family of their ties to the black community. However, issues of race inflect the narrative in ways that reflect and refract the process of identity formation in the contemporary American social milieu. In another episode, Hughley is concerned when his son begins to take the role of class clown to win acceptance in his new school: "For many of your friends, you're the first one of us they've gotten to know. They don't get BET out here . . . You've got a great opportunity and you have to take advantage of it."

Again, the burden of perception regarding blackness is addressed and placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual who is gaining access

to the mainstream—in this case, upper-middle-class suburbia. One might even hear the strains of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" ethos echoed in the charge given from one generation to the next—passed from father to son.

The controversy over the cancellation of *The Hughleys* on ABC (and its jump to its current home at UPN) was exacerbated by the appearance of the new ABC sitcom, *My Wife and Kids* (mid-season 2001), which stars Damon Wayans in the travails of a self-made businessman, his wife, and their cute kids in suburbia. In many ways, this series appears to have been created to replicate and replace *The Hughleys*. Hughley expressed outrage over what he perceived as a programming bait and switch: sell the audience on the premise of show the network didn't own (*The Hughleys* was produced by Greenblatt Janollari Studios, an independent) with one that they did (*My Wife and Kids* was produced by Disney-owned Touchstone Television—a corporate stepbrother of ABC). "You're doing my show all over again," said Hughley. "The only difference [is] that I'm not on it . . . I'm insulted because we did that show that was based on my life . . . if you take my life and shoot it with another set of Black folks, I've got a problem with that."<sup>22</sup>

*My Wife and Kids* did not become "*The Cosby Show* for the new millennium," as the folks at Touchstone and ABC had hoped; nor did *The Hughleys* ever regain its first-season ratings success. What is clear, however, is that, in making the jump to UPN, *The Hughleys* has gotten a bit broader and a bit rougher. The intriguing aspects of the Hughleys struggling to stay black, so to speak, in suburbia become somehow muted as Darryl's old neighborhood buddy is coaxed into suburban life and his (albeit loose) ties with the black community are illustrated by the recurring appearances of his mother (played by black sitcom veteran Marla Gibbs) and the trips to see the colorful types who live back home—which, in the case of the Hughleys, is a freeway ride away. In these instances, the performance of blackness—proving authenticity—often means reverting to stereotypical character constructions and narrative devices.

In an episode from the 2000–2001 season, in which Darryl trades quips with guest Rose Marie in a manner reminiscent of George and Florence on *The Jeffersons*, the familial ethos seems a bit askew: Darryl and Yvonne's greatest motivation for their white neighbors' reconciliation is a game of "slut on the couch" that Dave's arrival postponed. Although the relationship between the couple was never as sterile as that of Ward and June Cleaver, the prevalence of sexual innuendo seemed less about being sexy than about sensationalism. After all, Cliff never commented on Claire's "great ass." Although *The Hughleys* survived the trek from network to netlet, during the show's UPN run, it adopted narrative tics (and stereotypical tropes) that took it down the road more traveled.

## 2000 AND BEYOND: *THE PARKERS*, *EVERYBODY HATES CHRIS*, AND THE TWILIGHT OF BLACK SITCOMS

In July of 1999, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) made its first formal assault on network programming since the campaign that resulted in *Amos 'n' Andy* being pulled from network play. When NAACP president Kweisi Mfume blasted the networks for offering a fall lineup that was “a virtual whitewash of programming” in the organization’s memo on diversity, it put televisual representations of race on the agenda for networks execs, political pundits, and the viewing audience at large.<sup>23</sup> Threatened blackouts and brownouts (boycotts of network programming by people of color coalitions, such as the National Council for La Raza, National Asian American Telecommunications Association and the NAACP), as well as public forums on issues of diversity within the institutions of the industry (such as the National Association of Broadcasters), have yielded pledges to increase diversity from the Big Four (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC). However, the actual results were decidedly mixed.<sup>24</sup>

The situation comedy remains the staple of black representation in television fiction. In 2004 half of the African American characters seen on network television as series regulars were in sitcoms—the majority of which were on the netlets UPN and the WB. As Todd Boyd stated, “When you look at the last five years of Black representation on television, the shows that tend to be the most outrageous also draw the most audiences.”<sup>25</sup>

The struggle for expansive representations of blackness remains ever-present and unresolved. Although the search for the holy grail of a 20-share motivates everyone involved in producing television programs (black or white, comedy or drama), in the current programming climate, a television comedy is given very little time to find an audience—and it has to elicit laughs quickly. Often that pressure to be funny meant falling back on long-held stereotype staples.

If, indeed, the post-brownout age of new consciousness, as some have called it, has had an impact on the television’s representations of blackness, the results have been dubious at best—particularly in television comedies. Although some might assert that, as Robert Bianco stated, “The worst of TV’s shucking and jiving minstrel comedies—shows such as the WB’s *The Wayans Bros.* or UPN’s *Malcolm & Eddie* and the infamous *Homeboys from Outer Space* are gone, replaced in a large part by tamer, middle-class sitcoms,” it seems uncertain whether the middle-class alternatives are inherently superior. One must consider whether a middle-class milieu guarantees tamer content, as Bianco theorized. Do suspect constructions of blackness in African American-centered television comedies seem less objectionable when the bits of minstrelsy are either viewed through socially

refracted spectatorial lenses of class and gender or are folded into comic morality tales of uplift? The answer is always already yes and no.

In the new millennium, most black comedies were based in netlet spaces—the majority of which were on UPN. Thus, dedicating the final analytical passage to two series that began their broadcast lives in the last bastion of netlet comedy seems a logical choice. The series, from the beginning and the middle of the century's last decade, share significant characteristics: both star black stand-up comics, and both offer narrative riffs on the conventional construction of the domestic comedy. However, *The Parkers* (2000–2005) and *Everybody Hates Chris* (ongoing from 2005) occupy very different spaces in the black-sitcom spectrum in terms of style and substance, as well as critique and acclaim.

In 2000, following the NAACP memo on diversity, UPN introduced two new situation comedies, *The Parkers* and *Girlfriends*. *The Parkers*, a spin-off of the positivist teen sitcom *Moesha*, took a different comedic direction from its parent show. Whereas *Moesha* only sprinkled broad comedy in its narrative fare, over-the-top comedy was the roux for *The Parkers*'s gumbo. Nikki (Mo'Nique) and Kim (Countess Vaughn), formerly the comic relief on *Moesha*, are mother and daughter and best friends—they are even attending Santa Monica College together. The closeness of this mother-daughter relationship is central to all its episodes, even if the writing, in general, tends toward an easy laugh. For example, Kim enters in a leopard mini and a revealing top, and Nikki, who is dressed conservatively (as if for church), immediately comments on her daughter's attire:

Nikki: Kim, I know you don't plan to meet the Reverend in that hoochie outfit . . . ooh, cute shoes.

Kim: Why you trippin', Mama? He's just a man.

Nikki: Uh-uh . . . He's a man of the cloth.

Kim: Well, I should hope so. I don't want to see him naked.

As the episode continues, the adult female characters opt for stereotypes for African America women—as hypersexualized or hyperreligious—or sometimes both.

*The Parkers*' star, stand-up comedian Mo'Nique, says the series "is about a mother who raised that baby, did not give up, fought the struggle and now has gone back to college . . . It's about a 30-something brother, who is a college professor. It is very positive." As one of the producers, Sara Finney, notes, "A lot of people find these character very relatable, they feel comfortable with them . . . and a lot of women have said it's great to have a big, beautiful role model like Mo'Nique."<sup>26</sup> The nature of that "comfort" is arguably problematic. Furthermore, some would contend that the claims of positivity—the praise of Professor Oglevee (Dorien Wilson) as someone who can

“keep the Cosby legacy alive”—are undermined by other stereotypical character constructions. As *New York Times* critic Robert F. Moss notes,

It’s a losing effort, what with Nikki grabbing at his rear-end, and serves to remind us that the urbane owlsh Cosby persona has been all but buried in the Eddie Murphy revolution, an upheaval that has brought dozens of boisterous inner city voices to the contemporary chitlin’ circuit, and to some movies and television.<sup>27</sup>

Although I’m not sure that Moss’s comparison on Professor Oglevee and Cliff Huxtable (Cosby) are particularly apt, his mention of Nikki’s ass-grabbing speaks to bits of minstrelsy to which audiences have become accustomed in the black sitcom. The construction of the hypersexualized black female (Nikki’s unrelenting pursuit of the professor is on hiatus during other sexual flights of fancy), which is nothing new on either the big or small screen, and the assertion of physical power by a big black woman (Nikki’s intimidation of those who disagree with her) may not hark back to *Beulah*, but it certainly seems to have a touch of Sapphire in the construction of Nikki, who can also be seen as a conflation of Jackée on *227* and Aunt Esther on *Sanford and Son*.

**Tyler Williams (as Chris Rock) and Terry Crews (as Julius Rock) in *Everybody Hates Chris*, 2005.**



Nevertheless, *The Parkers*, the highest-rated series in African-American households for almost its entire run (on broadcast, on cable, and in syndication), mixed uplift with buffoonery—particularly in the construction of Nikki. Apparently there is some truth to Countess Vaughn's assessment of the show's appeal: "We want to make people laugh and we stretch it a bit . . . It's good to get in front of the TV and laugh at two crazy women."<sup>28</sup>

Five years later, *Everybody Hates Chris* premiered as the most anticipated comedy of the 2005–2006 season, which caused even more entertainment media frenzy because of its network (or, more aptly, netlet) home, United Paramount Network (UPN). Before deciding to base the series on the comic's life, Rock and cocreator Ali LeRoi originally pitched the series as a black urban *Wonder Years* (the early-nineties nostalgia dramedy). When Fox, who had the first option on the pilot, ultimately passed, citing concerns over the expense of yet another single-camera sitcom and over whether Rock's involvement after the pilot might be limited, UPN president Dawn Ostroff did not hesitate to make *Everybody Hates Chris* the centerpiece of the netlet's lineup.

Rock has said *Everybody Hates Chris* is not a literal version of his childhood, but it is a pretty literal version of his comedy. The voice of the series is undoubtedly Rock's, both in comic sensibility and in actuality: the comic supplies the voice-over as the adult version of his teenage alter ego (newcomer Tyler James Williams). As is true in the comic's stand-up, the sitcom refuses to elide issues of race and class. As LeRoi states, "We're dealing with class issues much more so than race issues. It's not black folks don't get along with white folks. It's which black folks don't get along with which white folks and why. It's broke people trying to do the best they can and we're not going to make a speech about it. We're just going to show them doing it."<sup>29</sup> This nuclear family is neither the Huxtables nor the Evanses (*Good Times*). *Everybody Hates Chris* directly engages class and race within a domestic-comedy context where neither the family nor its living conditions are idealized. Given that Rock's comedy and lived experiences inform the series, it also avoids the kind of excessive sentimentality often associated with nostalgia sitcoms.

The setting establishes a clear connection with a post-soul urban experience. The first episode begins with the parents, Julius (Terry Crews) and Rochelle (Tichina Arnold) and their children, Chris, Drew (Tequan Richmond), and Tonya (Imani Hakim), moving from the projects into an apartment in what was assumed to be a better neighborhood. Both the move and Chris's mother's insistence that he be bused to the all-white middle school were motivated by the desire for safety and opportunity. Rochelle's fierce protectiveness of her family; her firm, but loving discipline (with explicit threat of physical reinforcement: "I'll slap your name out of the phone book and call Ma Bell and tell her I did it"); and her fiscal sensibilities (running

the family finances “like the government—on a deficit”) embody the continued striving for an iteration of the American dream, which promises that the next generation will have it better than the previous one did. Yet the well-intentioned, pragmatic actions of Chris’s Civil Rights–era parents did not always yield the expected results, as Rock’s omniscient narration intones. He reflects upon the family’s 1982 move to Bed-Sty: “Had we known that Bed-Sty was going to be the center of the crack epidemic, I guess we would have moved somewhere else.”

Just as the first episode of *The Cosby Show* narrated aspects of *Bill Cosby: Himself*, the pilot of *Everybody Hates Chris* sampled the comic’s autobiographical stand-up material. The choice of sampled content, however, further underscores the post-soul aesthetic in the series. The subtext of the televised version of Rock’s “school as hell” routine (which recounts being called “nigger” and “getting beaten up just about every day”) questions the efficacy of the Civil Rights–era goals of integration for young black teens in 1980s urban America. When Chris attempts to use his purported street cred (being from “Bed-Sty: Do Or Die”) to out-black, so to speak, the quintessential bully, Joey Caruso, the bravado and verbal vivisection prove to be futile: he is only saved by running for the bus out of Brooklyn Beach (the televisual stand-in for Bensonhurst). The altercation with hostile white middle-schoolers, led by Caruso, and the indifference of white authority figures (the school principal, a police officer, and the bus driver), reveal a racial climate that is less than ideal, but not as bad as that of 1950s Little Rock or 1970s Boston. It also alludes to the process of dealing with how far we haven’t come.

That is not to say that the series discounts the Civil Rights struggle. In the final scene of the episode, when Julius checks in on his family, as he does every night “between his night job and his late-night job,” he asks Chris about school. As the voice-over states, “I didn’t tell him about the fight. My dad went to school during the Civil Rights era. After hoses, tanks, and dogs biting your ass, somehow Joey Caruso didn’t compare.” Archival footage depicting those trials (as well as black-and-white images of the bully, Caruso, just prior to Chris’s beating) is juxtaposed with the images of the father sitting on the edge of the son’s bed. The son’s respect for the father’s struggle, in the past and present, is unquestionable. In same scene, a softened reiteration of the critique in Rock’s stand-up routine of “Niggers vs. Black People” dealing with the desire to be lauded for things “you’re supposed to do” (“I take care of my kids”), forwards a construction of black fatherhood that acknowledges both the father’s era as well as the son’s. After the notoriously frugal Julius slips a couple of extra dollars to his son, he moves toward the door and says, “I’ll see you in the morning.” In voice-over, Rock remarks, “He was one of four fathers on the block. ‘I’ll see you in the morning’ meant he was coming home. Coming home was his way of saying ‘I love you.’”



On one hand, in this scene, as in Rock's stand-up, a traditional familial (arguably, paternal) paradigm is privileged. One might argue that it simultaneously speaks of the inordinate numbers of fatherless black children in the post-soul era and fails to address the sociopolitical reasons for the black male absence. On the other hand, the scene, like the series, might be seen as a comedic discursive attempt to create kinship and bridge the gap between a Civil Rights-era ethos and the lived experiences of those of us who grew up after the Civil Rights era.

*Everybody Hates Chris* is the only series discussed in this study that is still in production. The series survived the merger of UPN and the WB and secured a slot in the CW's fall 2007 lineup. However, even the sitcom darlings have a precarious existence, particularly when their time slot is in this last black block of programming on network television.

### **SAME AS IT EVER WAS: A CONCLUSION ABOUT THE STRUGGLES OF BLACK REPRESENTATION**

As of 1999, America boasted over a million African American households, yet out of more than 115 shows airing on 6 broadcast networks, only 18 shows feature an African American cast or lead character, with 10 of those shows airing on UPN and the WB.<sup>30</sup> Even with an increase in the numbers of representations, as the number of black sitcoms shrink—from 15 black sitcoms in 1997 to 6 in 2001—so do the number of characters who have a recurring space on the televisual landscape.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the numbers still drive both public and private discourses surrounding racial representations—whether according to share points or numbers of black shows currently on the air. When the WB and UPN merged into the CW in 2006, the survival of the black sitcom, as a genre, was certainly called into question. In the 2007 television season, only three black sitcoms are on the fall schedule: *Girlfriends*, *The Game*, and the anchor of the Monday night black block, *Everybody Hates Chris*.

In 1990, J. Fred MacDonald stated in *Blacks and White TV*, his history of televisual representations of African Americans from the moment of television to the rise of cable, "Because there is comparatively little minority representation in radio, and television, and because each performance by an African-American is regarded as a chance to make a statement about realities, each appearance takes on additional weight."<sup>32</sup> His statement expresses the points upon which the industry, the critic, and the audience agree: the pool of television's constructions of black life is limited, and the representations within it are, more often than not, problematic. The position of the black sitcom in the current television landscape does not bode well for either the increase in the number of series or the inclusion of myriad representations of blackness. This space seems disconcertingly akin to

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the bad old days, when notions of progressiveness and regressiveness were overshadowed by issues of absence and exclusion.

### NOTES

1. Darrell Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedies and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 10.

2. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 75.

3. Ibid., 75.

4. "Alvin Childress Dies; Played Amos in TV's 'Amos 'N' Andy,'" *Washington Post*, April 22, 1986.

5. James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 67.

6. 1965 was a volatile year. In February, Malcolm X, black nationalist and founder of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, was shot to death by assailants who were members of the Black Muslim faith—which Malcolm had recently abandoned in favor of orthodox Islam. In March, Civil Rights activists from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its student wing, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led by Martin Luther King Jr., staged a march from Selma to Montgomery in support of the Voting Rights Act. Fifty marchers were hospitalized after police stopped them at the Pettus Bridge with a police blockade that used tear gas, whips, and clubs against them in the incident. The television news coverage of the events in Selma, dubbed Bloody Sunday (once again), brought the Civil Rights struggle into American living rooms. Bloody Sunday is widely considered the catalyst for the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August of 1965. That same August, the first major race-related rebellion of the 1960s was sparked by an act of police brutality related to the arrest of a twenty-one-year-old African American in Los Angeles's South Central neighborhood of Watts. This incident, along with decades of racial tensions, overcrowding in the neighborhood, and a summer heat wave, prompted the riots, which lasted five days and left more than thirty-four dead, at least a thousand wounded, and an estimated \$200 million in property destroyed. An estimated 35,000 African Americans took part in the riot, which required 16,000 National Guardsmen, county deputies, and city police to put down. It would not be last time that the rage and frustration associated with the urban condition would both figuratively and literally erupt into flames.

7. Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 169.

8. Ibid., 169–70.

9. *Good Times* was a spin-off of *Maude*; the latter starred Bea Arthur as the decidedly upper-middle-class, über-liberal, women's-libber cousin of Edith Bunker. Before moving to Chicago, Florida Evans was Maude Findlay's maid on the series, which was itself a spin-off from *All in the Family*.

10. Bambi L. Haggins, "There's No Place Like Home: The American Dream, African-American Identity, and the Situation Comedy," *Velvet Light Trap* (Spring 1999): 29.

11. Gray, *Watching Race*, 80.

12. Linda K. Fuller, *The Cosby Show: Audiences, Impact, Implications* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 69.

13. Issues of class and other less urbane constructions of the urban black experience were not directly confronted in the series—although some might argue that the addition of Clair's cousin from Bedford–Stuyvesant (Erika Alexander) in 1990 may have been a response to the criticism over the fiscal insulation of the Huxtable clan.

14. Interestingly, the main signifier of wealth in this instance is the art displayed in the Huxtable brownstone, the decor of which had previously been constructed as typical of the black middle class. In this episode, Vanessa is seeking the acceptance of a group of popular girls and realizes the cultural cachet of their economic standing after the girls comment upon the painting (Ellis Wilson's *The Funeral Procession*) over the fireplace. Vanessa admits that it cost \$11,000 and explains that the artist was Clair's great uncle. Although this provides a forum for showcasing African American art and culture, one of the aspects of the series that was often lauded, it also establishes a sense of lineage, at least for Clair—a clear connection to the black cultural elite.

15. Gray, *Watching Race*, 80.

16. Haggins, "There's No Place Like Home," 30.

17. Kristen Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105.

18. Brian Lowry, "For Rival UPN and WB: The Future Is a Matter of Focus," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1998.

19. Ibid.

20. Greg Braxton, "Family Feud: Was One ABC Sitcom About an African American Family Used to Replace Another?" *Newsday*, April 8, 2001.

21. Robin R. Means-Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland, 2000), 10.

22. Braxton, "Family Feud."

23. The widely circulated NAACP memo on diversity outlined sweeping demands for increased diversity behind the camera, as well as in front of it.

24. Stephen Holden, "Trying on Blackface in a Flirtation with Fire," *New York Times*, October 6, 2000.

25. "The Parkers Win Big Laughs as No. 1 Show in Black Households," *Jet*, April 10, 2000.

26. Ibid.

27. Robert F. Moss, "The Shrinking Life Span of the Black Sitcom," *New York Times*, February 25, 2001.

28. Matthew Gilbert, "The Parkers Misses the Funny Bone," *Boston Globe*, August 30, 1999.

29. Lee Hall, "African Americans Watch More TV Yet Are Often Ignored," *Electronic Media*, February 1, 1999.

30. Moss, "The Shrinking Life."

31. J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago: Prentice Hall, 1992), 123.

32. Ibid.

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# Mainstream African American Cinema: The Struggle for Black Images in Hollywood

*Wendy Sung*

At the 2002 Oscar ceremony, Halle Berry, Denzel Washington, and Sidney Poitier stood at the podium of America's most prestigious cinema institution to accept their awards. For the respective Best Actress, Best Actor, and Lifetime Achievement winners, the event marked climatic milestones in their Hollywood careers. But more importantly, this triptych of awards unfolded into a night of significance for African American history. Many media outlets touted these wins as an example of Hollywood's racial progress and tolerance. But, in light of the bitter struggle for representation and control that has characterized the African American relationship with cinema, this watershed moment was rife with ambivalence. On one hand, the recognition and honoring of these great black actors was a well-deserved and moving experience. On the other, this night of "firsts" for the respective Best Actor<sup>1</sup> and Best Actress only occurred because of failures to acknowledge the contributions of previous African American greats in Hollywood's long and discriminatory history.

The Oscars is more than an awards ceremony or a national event but is in fact a symbolic stage that elucidates the ways in which the complex theater of African American popular culture interacts with the mainstream. In her famous Oscar acceptance speech, Halle Berry emotionally proclaimed, "This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll. It's for the women that stand beside me—Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett, and it's for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened."<sup>2</sup> Although Berry's assertion that the door has now been opened has yet to be proven, her invocation of both past black screen legends and contemporary peers pointedly reminds us that the contributions of African

Denzel Washington (Best Actor for *Training Day*) and Halle Berry (Best Actress for *Monster's Ball*) at the 74th Annual Academy Awards, 2002.



ABC/Photofest

Americans, both on- and off-screen, have long been obscured within Hollywood. In many cases, periods of black invisibility have not been conquered by complex and humanistic representations of African Americans but often replaced by a “carefully regulated, segregated visibility.”<sup>3</sup> Because of this, Berry’s statement resonates with deep historical meaning in the tunnels of Hollywood’s racist past.

Profit-driven Hollywood has often thrived on the formulaic and pleasurable reproducibility of representations to the benefit of some and the

detriment of others. Thus, it cannot be forgotten that cinema, although an artistic medium, is a capitalistic enterprise and a fundamental social institution. When it comes to race, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall seminally states that “the media construct for us a definition of what *race* is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be. They help classify out the world in terms of the categories of race.”<sup>4</sup> To be certain, audiences often make sense of the world around them through the representations that they see on the screen; and in this way, the social construction of race becomes a lived reality. However, it should be understood that cinema deals in representations of the real rather than reality itself.

Because of cinema’s potential to influence the very way race is understood, the need for the fierce critical interrogation of images is clear. For that reason, film scholar Ed Guerrero urgently reminds us that cinematic worlds are not reality but have symbolic, mythic, and, above all, *political* meanings.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the relationship between African Americans and Hollywood is fundamentally linked to larger political battles over power. The United States itself is a racialized and sexualized formation structured by unequal access to and distributions of power, stratified by considerations of class, race, and gender. To be sure, the power of representation, visibility, creative license, and the ability to control one’s images are all constituents in the political struggles for social justice. As such, the importance of cinema and popular culture in general should not be underestimated. Media is a terrain for ideological transformation and intervention and has the sphere of influence to engage in a crucial dialectic with systems of power. It is an undisputed fact that film is a powerful communicative and pedagogical tool. In this way, the exigency for rendering the histories of mainstream African American cinema visible is imperative. Not only does it rectify certain gaps in cinema history, but, more generally, histories of this nature excavate a political history and elucidate the power structures in American popular culture and society at large. Thus, this chapter will provide an overview of mainstream African American cinema that examines key black film movements as well as the state of contemporary mainstream cinema today.

## DEFINING TERMS: WHAT IS MAINSTREAM AFRICAN AMERICAN CINEMA?

The implications of a label such as that of mainstream African American cinema are both complex and diverse. Although the role of African Americans is without question monumental to the discussion of cinema, the definition of the terms “mainstream” and “African American” in this conjunctive usage necessitate clarification. In most cases, mainstream cinema refers to films both produced within the Hollywood studio system and

conformed to the aesthetic codes common to the commercial film industry. However, the very process of defining mainstream African American cinema can include a great number of criteria, including financial (accrue-ments of funds, means of production, methods of exhibition, marketing, box office success), textual (subject matter, conceptions of black authenticity, African American control and popular appeal, engagement with stereotypes and ideologies), and reception (the way in which a film is received by audiences of all ethnicities).

Given these extensive concerns, the first task at hand is the acknowledgment of the daunting complexity of such a title, followed by an attempt to define it. Because hardly any aspect of mainstream American culture has not been directly or indirectly shaped by African Americans, we are able to locate the African American influence throughout film history. But this chapter does not assume the impossible task of covering the historical gamut of African Americans in cinema. Rather, for our purposes, the chapter's intention is to provide a general examination of key cinema movements, films, and figures located under the popular consensus of mainstream African American cinema as defined by notable film scholars. Specifically, this chapter will examine periods of black film that have had an intertwined and often ambivalent relationship with the commercial film industry. In addition, analyses of specific black narrative films and key figures that have procured mainstream visibility and financial success are necessary. The representations of African Americans take form, disappear, reappear, and change, and it is the objective of this chapter to interrogate the historical and ideological meanings behind these changes, as well as the potential agency of the filmmakers who bring these images to the screen.

## THE ORIGINS OF HOLLYWOOD AND BLACK REPRESENTATION

In 1915, a film was released that broke ticket sales records, swept audiences off their feet, and was compared to “writing history with lighting” by President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>6</sup> This same film perpetuated some of the most egregious racist stereotypes of African Americans in history. D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) changed cinematic history and remains the father text, the influential cornerstone, of Hollywood cinema—as well as one of the most insidiously racist films in history. More generally, the fact that the birth of cinema “coincided with the giddy heights of the imperial project, with an epoch where Europe held sway over vast tracts of alien territory and hosts of subjugated peoples,” has affected the very core of cinema and its ideological underpinnings. The cinematic apparatus itself is not indelibly marked by an imperialist pen, but it was used by pioneers of the recorded image in an imperialist context and “deployed in ways flattering to the imperial subject as superior.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, nascent cinematic uses



often circulated images that were inscribed with an assemblage of imperialist power relations that allowed these subjugated peoples to be represented from the subjectivity of European colonizing powers. This precedent has impacted the very basis of cinema and filmic history.

Given these antecedents, it is no surprise that the historical origins of Hollywood cinema are no less problematic. *The Birth of a Nation*'s plot mobilizes abominable black stereotypes in order to glorify white supremacy, forever influencing cinema's inscription of race. It told the story of the Old South, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction. The film glorified the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and invoked a pantheon of racist stereotypes that still appear in cinema today.<sup>8</sup> The film's innovative artistry and narrative storytelling became the established language of commercial cinema and demonstrated what Hollywood films could be: lavish productions, blockbuster ticket sales, and unprecedented amounts of media attention, as well as racist ideology.

The significance of *The Birth of a Nation* in this context is dualistic: the film firmly establishes the complex place of African Americans as both the object of derision and fear and yet also depicts them as integral to the imaginings of the nation itself. As Guerrero points out, "[T]he negotiation of racial images, boundaries, and hierarchies has been part of our national life from its beginning. The turbulent power of race is evinced by the variety of ways in which the images and historical experiences of African Americans and other people of color are symbolically figured in commercial cinema."<sup>9</sup> Put another way, race and the racist portrayals of African Americans have been integral to the very conceptualization of both America and American cinema since the medium's inception.

Without question, the commercial film industry and American society has come a long way since D. W. Griffith's film. But, as the cornerstone of mainstream American cinema, *The Birth of a Nation* is important not simply for historical reasons but also for the contemporary issues the film raises. Questions remain: Have constellations of power in mainstream commercial cinema changed? How have historical, economic, and political factors affected the representation of African Americans and the control over their images? Have black filmmakers such as Spike Lee truly achieved an autonomous space within mainstream American cinema, or does Hollywood still rigorously control what we see onscreen?

Prevalent film scholarship on mainstream African American cinema has generally divided the subject into three definitive historical movements. Tommy L. Lott, writing on both Hollywood and independent black cinema, recapitulates:

According to Guerrero there was a pre-blaxploitation era, during which a mainstream image of black accommodationism and submissiveness

prevailed. This was followed by a blaxploitation era of resistance and co-optation dominated by black action films employing strategic reversals of mainstream ideology. After more than a decade of ideological recuperation by Hollywood studios, the filmmaking practices of both black independents and blaxploitation era filmmakers slowly merged into the present era of the new black cinema.<sup>10</sup>

Lott presents this summary in order to assert that Guerrero's historical schema represents a critical intervention in common film history. The categorization of black independent cinema has normally been contingent on the assumption that it coexists with mainstream cinema in a strict dichotomous relationship. Lott, however, contests this relationship. In his opinion, the boundaries of independent and mainstream black cinema are far more mutable. This cross-fertilization of mainstream and independent film practices is best illustrated through Guerrero's two points of juncture—the period when Hollywood's appropriation of Blaxploitation occurred and the point in the 1990s when new black cinema arose. Both of these moments are when Hollywood or mainstream film sought to co-opt independent black cinema. Thus, it is at these two significant points in mainstream African American cinema that we can best examine the relationship between the mainstream and black film.

## THE CO-OPTATION OF BLAXPLOITATION

For some contemporary audiences, to recall the Blaxploitation era is to conjure images of stereotypical and often farcical portrayals of black masculinity. However, the originating movement of Blaxploitation is quite different than that of the Hollywood film varieties commonly mocked in popular memory. Indeed, the depleted revolutionary significance of these films was the result of numerous factors that occurred in the commercial film industry. However, the revolutionary intention of the images of early Blaxploitation films before Hollywood's co-optation is clear when we examine the "message movies" that preceded them.

These "problem films" or "Negro cycle films," typically produced from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, were characterized by an overarching sentiment of integrationist concerns. Scholar Paula J. Massood characterizes the films as positive changes to the stereotypical images that had come before them but also delimits their scope. Although such films like *Home of the Brave* (1949) and *No Way Out* (1950) sought to tackle racism within the Army and workplace, respectively, the films were undermined by their ultimate limited and situational content. These "message films" offered African Americans more opportunities for roles and attempted to address the concerns of racial tensions and inequalities, but their inability to speak

to black audiences was apparent. In fact, certain ideological tenets within these films underscored the fact that Hollywood tightly controlled what black images were suitable for audiences.

“Message movies introduced characters who were almost always male (and almost always played by Sidney Poitier and, to a lesser extent, Harry Belafonte) and almost always middle-class or professional. Additionally, sexuality played an important role in the civil rights era representation of black characters, not for its presence, but rather for its absence, as exemplified by the characters played by Poitier.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, these nonthreatening characters typified largely white, middle-class codes of acceptable behavior. The persona of both Poitier<sup>12</sup> and a subsequent figure such as Bill Cosby would come to represent a noble, desexualized, nonthreatening figure—the Civil Rights era’s notion of what is commonly known as the “race man.”<sup>13</sup> The recuperative and ideological work of nullifying negative, racist stereotypes while simultaneously promoting integrationist ideals is obviously central to this figure. Although these images worked to counteract the decades of cinema history that had denigrated African Americans, this ennobling process had its own implicit set of problems: this one monolithic image resulted in a tightly controlled, limited representation that restricted potentially diverse images that could have attested to the black community’s complex humanity.<sup>14</sup>

However, the restraining parameters surrounding the image of the race man would be questioned and eventually challenged. Representations of African Americans that spoke to black audiences rather than “uplifting the race,” which primarily served to assuage and comfort white society, were sought. Thus, what appeared in 1970s—an African American screen hero who was “male, urban, sexually and socially virile, and often problematic for his middle-class critics—both African American and white”<sup>15</sup>—was a direct response to these predilections. This figure countered the race man of the civil rights era and provided the emerging wave of black nationalism with its cinematic archetype. This shift indicates the changes in American’s racial politics from a nonviolent, civil rights dogma to a more militant ideology of black nationalism. By 1968, black America had experienced three assassinations, including that of Martin Luther King, and hundreds of urban rebellions, including major uprisings in Detroit, Los Angeles, and Newark. The promises of civil rights appeared conjured and facile, because although African Americans gained political and legal rights, they still remained relegated to the bottom of America’s socioeconomic ladder. It was in this cultural milieu that black audiences craved and demanded the images of what would be the revolutionary beginnings of the Blaxploitation movement.

Concurrently, Hollywood's economic fate was becoming dire. By the end of the 1960s, the commercial film industry was on the verge of collapse. By 1971, annual profits had plunged from 90 million to a meager 15.5 million. In an effort to curtail budgets and cut huge blockbuster productions, studios turned to independently produced features as a remedy to an ailing industry. Additionally, Hollywood faced mounting pressure from growing black political activism in the culture at large, and the NAACP specifically, regarding its discriminatory practices on- and off-screen.<sup>16</sup> The confluence of these factors forced open commercial film studios and presented a pivotal opportunity for the entry of black filmmakers such as Gordon Parks Jr. and Sr., Michael Schultz, Bill Gunn, and Melvin Van Peebles.

But it was the paramount success of Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), amidst the shift in America's changing race politics and Hollywood's grim financial crisis, that announced how lucrative black, urban audiences could be. The film's paltry budget of \$500,000 generated an astounding \$10 million-plus gross.<sup>17</sup> And this astonishing profit set into motion Hollywood's process of co-optation, producing a flood of formulaic studio films that sought to reproduce *Sweetback's* box office success.

As previously mentioned, *Sweetback's* huge success was an important and direct result of the inner city black community's insurgent need to see representations of themselves that reflected the upheavals of old integrationist ideals. Previous studio films such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) and *Watermelon Man* (1970) had featured black athletes Jim Brown and Fred Williamson in a more assertive light, an indication of the rising influence of black nationalism.<sup>18</sup> But it was Van Peebles's *Sweetback* who personified the black community's need for new images. The new black hero that emerged from the waning civil rights movement was overtly sexual, openly defiant, and violent against unjust white authority figures. This archetype was often presented in opposition to a "stereotypical white menace who was bent on destroying the African American community, primarily through the influx of drugs and the accompanying culture of violence."<sup>19</sup> And, Guerrero recounts, "As Van Peebles puts it, [*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*] tells the story of a 'bad nigger' who challenges the oppressive white system and wins, thus articulating the main feature of the Blaxploitation formula."<sup>20,21</sup>

Indeed, this central premise spoke so heavily to the revolutionary impulses of black nationalism that Huey P. Newton, cofounder and leader of the Black Panther Party, called the film "the first truly revolutionary Black film made . . . presented to us by a Black man."<sup>22</sup> However, the film was immensely controversial, and debates within the black intelligentsia pointed out the film's many obviously problematic elements. Unchallenged

patriarchy, homophobia, and misogyny within the film further strengthened criticisms and questioned the revolutionary nature of its protagonist and his actions. In reference to *Sweetback's* use of sex as a weapon within the film,<sup>23</sup> black critic Lerone Bennett Jr. remarked, "nobody ever f\*\*\*ed their way to freedom"; Bennett further criticizes the film by calling it "neither revolutionary or black."<sup>24</sup>

These debates<sup>25</sup> over black authenticity, however, fell on deaf ears as Hollywood rushed to duplicate *Sweetback's* success, despite the maelstrom of controversy surrounding it. But Hollywood did make a change. The subsequent films were "cranked out by white directors and garnered tremendous profits for the mainstream commercial system but also subordinated black talent and creativity to the needs of that system at all levels."<sup>26</sup> Widely considered the first film in Hollywood's Blaxploitation genre, Gordon Parks's *Shaft* (1971) demonstrates that the *Sweetback's* ideology was quickly rewritten for the commercial mainstream and still successful. Protagonist John Shaft was intended to be a white actor, who was, in fact, the creation of a white novelist and adapted for the screen by a white screenwriter. Most significantly, his occupation of a detective rather than a revolutionary symbolized that *Shaft* was not fighting against the racist, white system, as *Sweetback*

Richard Roundtree (as John Shaft) in Gordon Parks's 1971 film *Shaft*.



MGM/Photofest

had, but with it. To be sure, *Shaft* still exhibited the some outward posturings of Sweetback, including jibes directed toward various (usually racist) white folk. However, these instances relegate the racial discourse to individual conflicts rather than the larger systemic struggles against racism, undermining its political critique. That being said, not all Blaxploitation films reworked certain ideological components the way *Shaft* did; an example such as *Superfly* (1972) focused on drug dealer Priest and his hustling to escape the urban ghetto. However, the onslaught of reproduced and manufactured Hollywood facsimiles of the same formula sapped whatever social commentary was present and, as Todd Boyd writes,

turn[ed] the potentially revolutionary actions of African American cinema into a series of running gags, devoid of all political substance. As exemplified in Keenen Ivory Wayans' 1989 film *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka*, the Blaxploitation era became, for many, a comic reference point, and a regrettable debasement of the excesses of 1970's Black culture.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of this, the representation of black masculinity (though often overblown) was broadened in many ways. Blaxploitation's female stars, too, represented a curious development. Indeed, cult figure Pam Grier (who would be later filmically resurrected by Quentin Tarantino) and Tamara Dobson produced a subgenre in the dominant male-centered film movement with such films as *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), and *Cleopatra Jones* (1974). Framed in pornographic sentiments, Lott contends that these heroines reflected yet another co-optation of Hollywood. In essence, "we can understand the ideological function of a re-gendered of the 'bad nigga' [as illustrated by the aforementioned Hollywood offerings] to be co-optation of both the blaxploitation macho image and the rising tide of feminist consciousness."<sup>28</sup> While Lott's assertion does have validity, it is also undeniable that "black women could find little in their adolescent-male-fantasy-oriented roles to identify with."<sup>29</sup>

In the end, and in spite of the paradigmatic shift that *Sweetback* represented, the genre was short-lived. It is somewhat ironic, as Guerrero points out, that the end to the Blaxploitation genre was indebted to the very factors that led to its ascension:

"the reversals and shifts in the same fluid mix of enabling conditions that came into play at the rise of Blaxploitation also influenced its undoing. For as black critical reaction to the violent, drug dealing pimps and gangsters of Blaxploitation formula sharpened, and Hollywood became less economically dependent on the genre for short-term profit, Blaxploitation came to a speedy demise."<sup>30</sup>

Although Blaxploitation's place in black popular culture is without question, Lott's concept of Hollywood co-optation points to a consistent proclivity of the commercial film industry and American popular culture in general. The capitalistic needs of Hollywood both mass-produced these black images when it was fiscally necessary and then disappeared them when they were no longer needed. It was not that these films no longer continued to make money, but rather that when Hollywood realized that its crisis was over, it shifted back to its more traditional representations of African Americans. By the end of 1978, the Blaxploitation genre had subsided, rendering invisible "all things black in the film industry."<sup>31</sup> However, the potentials of a new black film wave in the 1990s would bring black images once again to the screen, although in a much different context.

### THE NEW VANGUARD AND NEGOTIATIONS OF THE MAINSTREAM

Various scholars have labeled the surge in African American films in the 1990s as "New Jack Cinema," the "Black New Wave," and the "New Black Movie Boom." No matter which moniker is used, the catalyst of this film movement was a new generation of black filmmakers whose films toed the line of socially conscious commentary and mainstream commercial viability. This generation includes: the Hudlin Brothers, Albert and Allen Hughes, Bill Duke, Robert Townsend, John Singleton, and the period's most visible and prolific member, Spike Lee. What distinguished these filmmakers from previous periods was their ability to navigate mainstream white culture as well as produce new articulations of "blackness" that would be informed by both the cultural productions of hip-hop and persistent rage of the post-Reagan era.

The societal context surrounding this movement was one of ironic counterpoint to the Blaxploitation movement. The fruits of the civil rights movement, though able to outlaw the desegregation and overt racism of the past, nevertheless proved unsuccessful in their attempts to eradicate the institutional racism of the system. By the 1990s, African Americans were suffering from worsening economic and political conditions in urban centers. The unemployment caused by the deindustrialization of America's cities, the economic abandonment of Reagan's national policies, and the violence from a promulgation of crack cocaine all amounted to a "black rage [that had] lost its political focus in this violent apartheid environment; it [became] an internalized form of self-destruction expressed as gang and drug warfare."<sup>32</sup> In addition to these factors, the confluence of racial profiling and the rise of the prison-industrial complex, which used incarceration as a resolution to social, political, and economic problems, made it evident that America's racial conflicts were far from over.

At this point in the commercial film industry, the proliferation of cinema schools and departments institutionalized filmmaking in universities and provided entry to those previously unable to obtain access to a once notoriously insular industry. Although the effects of this are most famously seen in Hollywood's golden triad of film school directors to come out of the 1970s, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg, the results of this schooling would come to fruition at a later date for black mainstream cinema.<sup>33</sup>

With the outlawing of Jim Crow laws and segregation, the change in America's racial politics allowed a new generation of black filmmakers, a post-civil rights (and mostly middle-class) generation, to grow up in different era from that of their Blaxploitation predecessors.<sup>34</sup> This post-integration environment allowed primarily middle-class African American youth access to the upper echelons of educational institutions but did not shield them from the institutional racism that still permeated American society. Together, these two key elements set the stage for the 1990s generation of black filmmakers. But it was not until Hollywood once again reached a point of financial exigency that they were able to make their debut with cautious studio backing.

An overall drop in profits caused by the disappointing returns of expensive blockbusters, a crash in video rentals, and a deepening national recession resulted in another one of Hollywood's periodic economic slumps. Yet again, Hollywood's economic state was dire and by 1992, ticket sales were at a fifteen-year low. And, yet again, Hollywood turned its sights on the black community as an untapped reserve audience.<sup>35</sup> Shedding light onto the commonalities that propelled both Blaxploitation and this emergent black new wave, Guerrero points out Hollywood's repetitive tendency to rely on the "mythical, ever-shifting black movie audience" to rescue the industry, but only when absolutely necessary. This condescending strategy provides further weight to the theory that

"the movie industry routinely ignores black filmic aspirations and marginalizes black box office power until it can be called on . . . to make up sinking profit margins at any given moment of economic crisis. Accordingly, then, two of these moments of crisis were the studio profit slumps that coincided with the rise of black film production waves in the late 1960's to early 1970's and again in the late 1980's into the 1990's."<sup>36</sup>

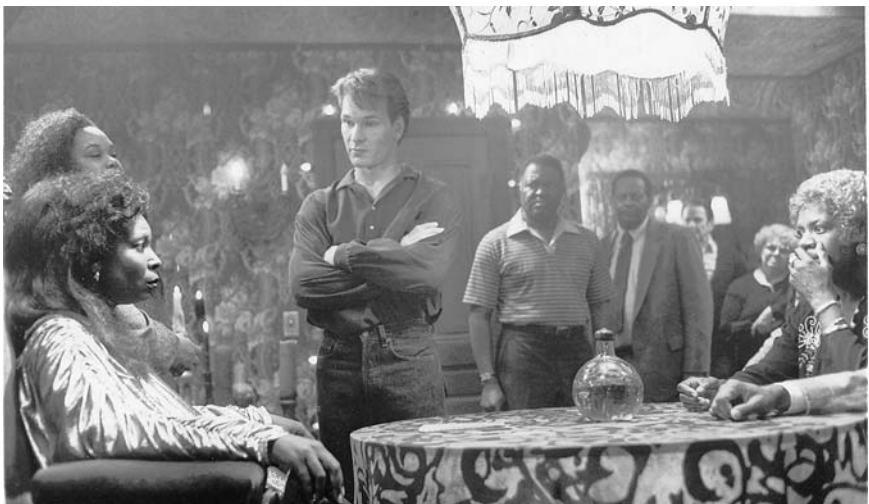
Indeed, 1991 proved to be a groundbreaking year, with twelve films directed by African Americans and twenty-some other productions that starred or had significant roles for black actors. That same year, Whoopi Goldberg won an Academy Award for her supporting role in *Ghost* (1990),



playing Oda Mae Brown. This marked only the second time Hollywood had honored a black woman with a statuette; the first was Hattie McDaniel for her mammy role<sup>37</sup> in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*. Perhaps not surprisingly, Goldberg's recognition was for a role common to African Americans in mainstream cinema, the magical Negro. With her ability to speak to the dead, Oda Mae Brown serves as a conduit for the white heterosexual couple at the emotional and narrative center of the film and is ultimately put in service for the purpose of idealizing the lives of these upper-middle-class white people.<sup>38</sup> To be sure, Goldberg's stellar performance deserved to be recognized, but the role of Oda Mae Brown is indicative of the continued control and regulated placement of black images.

Whereas the production of Blaxploitation largely involved white directors and screenwriters making films for black audiences, this new wave saw black filmmakers making films for black audiences and the mainstream public. Indeed, Vincent F. Rocchio astutely points out the change in broader cultural sentiments during this time: mainstream American culture had shifted from repressing race to consuming it. Moreover, Rocchio contends that Spike Lee's films, in particular, did not "so much cause commercial viability as function within it."<sup>39</sup> In other words, mainstream acceptance of this new black wave had less to do with the progressive racial attitudes in American society and more to do with America's new obsession with the consumption of difference rather than its suppression. This is a particularly fascinating development in relation to Lee.

**Whoopi Goldberg (as Oda Mae Brown) and Patrick Swayze (as Sam Wheat) in Jerry Zucker's 1990 film *Ghost*.**



Paramount/Photofest

In many ways, Lee can be seen as the cultural representative of this black new wave. His films receive the most mainstream media attention of his contemporaries, and the identifiable “A Spike Lee Joint” opening title has gained a cultural niche enviable by most directors. As a figure, his visibility in the public is instantaneously recognizable. Though small in stature, his NY baseball hats, oversized horn-rimmed glasses, and distinctive fashion sense all correlate to a signature aesthetic that has made him one of the most recognizable directors, African American or otherwise, in Hollywood history. Indeed, if one were to examine this black film movement, Lee would undoubtedly be both its catalyst and its focus. As a director, actor, and cultural figure of this period, Lee is a symbol and a personification of how this insurgent black film movement began and of its eventual commoditization and entrenchment into the mainstream.

Lee attended Morehouse, a historically black college and the “citadel of the Black male bourgeois,”<sup>40</sup> during the prominent Blaxploitation era. Later, he received an MFA from the prestigious NYU Tisch School of the Arts in film production. Nevertheless, his career as a graduate student was controversial. His short film *The Answer* (1980) resulted in a departmental censure during his first probationary year and almost led to his expulsion. The film told the story of a black filmmaker who was given the chance to make a multimillion-dollar remake of *The Birth of a Nation*. Lee cited his “not-so-kind” portrayal of D. W. Griffith, the “father of Hollywood cinema” as the reason for the controversy.<sup>41</sup> Shortly after graduating however, Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) drew the attention of Hollywood.

Lee’s film was an ostensibly a *Rashomon*-like narrative that detailed the main protagonist, Nola Darling’s romantic involvements. Nola’s refusal to commit to society’s expectations of a monogamous relationship provided opportunities for complex depictions of the people in her life. “The film was located in a space comprised of intelligent, liberated, and middle-class women, sure of their independence and their sexual preferences. Also, Lee provided, in the guise of Nola’s love interests, a rich variety of black male characters rather than one-dimensional variations on the sexually and physically empowered Sweetbacks and Shafts from the 1970s.”<sup>42</sup> *She’s Gotta Have It* established Lee as an independent filmmaker with enormous mainstream appeal as the \$175,000 black-and-white film amassed large-scale returns of \$11 million dollars (including international receipts). This film, like *Sweetback*, proved once again how lucrative black film could be.

But what distinguishes Lee and the rest of his cohort from their Blaxploitation predecessors is paramount. Lee’s dynamical position courts mainstream appeal while maintaining his position as a black filmmaker. As bell hooks differentiates, “To become filmmakers black artists globally start from the standpoint of resistance, no matter the culture they work in. That is why the term black filmmaker signifies something different from the

simple word filmmaker.”<sup>43</sup> With this distinction, we can understand that Lee exists in somewhat of a paradox: operating within, and subjected to, the mainstream Hollywood apparatus while articulating a politic of resistance against that very system. To put it more felicitously, Cornel West’s idea of “the new cultural politics of difference” explains this precarious location:

The new cultural politics of difference is neither simply oppositional in contesting the mainstream (or malestream) for inclusion, nor transgressive in the avant-gardist sense of shocking conventional bourgeois audiences. It embraces the distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action. . . . This perspective impels these cultural critics and artists to reveal, as an integral component of their production, the very operations of power within their immediate work contexts (academy, museum, gallery, mass media). This strategy, however, also puts them in an inescapable double bind—while linking their activities to the fundamental, structural overhaul of these institutions, they often remain financially dependent on them (so much for “independent” creation). For these critics of culture, theirs is a gesture that is simultaneously progressive and co-opted.<sup>44</sup>

Keeping this definition in mind, it is clear that Lee’s career has taken a certain trajectory that has placed him squarely within the mainstream. Although *She’s Gotta Have It* signified his dualistic entry in the mainstream and independent film spheres, *Malcolm X* (1992) symbolizes his complete embedment within the commercial film industry.

Tellingly, Lee’s *Malcolm X* remains the most striking example of commercial success and critical acclaim of the black new wave period, in addition to being the first African American-directed film to pass the \$100 million mark at the box office. Mainstream media outlets embraced the film, its director, and its star, Denzel Washington, who received an Academy Award nomination for his performance. Most obviously, the film is centered on the story of the black nationalist icon’s life and tragic death. Despite this rich historical fodder, some critics pointed out that Lee’s film was not political but merely human drama and, more divisively, that the film represented a mainstreaming of a political icon that represented the mainstream’s antithesis. Some also noted that Lee had simplified the details of Malcolm’s political stance and omitted some of his most controversial statements and views in the film.<sup>45</sup> These examples illustrate that Spike Lee, as a black cultural producer, was also a “middle-class black [artist] driven by the demands of corporate capitalism.”

Denzel Washington in Spike Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*.

Warner Bros./Photofest

Lee increasingly gained recognition as a mainstream commercial filmmaker and as a cultural icon; in the end, his popularity as a figure rivaled and in fact eclipsed his significance as a filmmaker. Boyd contends that “Lee and his generation of cultural producers have been transformed into mainstream icons whose politics may have remained intact, but whose influence as the avant-garde of black popular culture may have given way to more insurgent cultural impulses.”<sup>46</sup> Boyd goes on to caution that being incorporated into the mainstream is not a denunciation of this group of filmmakers. Rather, this entrenchment in the mainstream, by its very nature, can in fact alter its terrain. However, this change comes at an expense: “The mainstream is constantly transformed by those who infiltrate it and who become more influential at a corporate level, but less significant from the perspective of cultural impact on Black popular audiences, especially for those who make up the lower class.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the insurgency that was once associated with Lee and this black film movement waned as it has “infiltrated the mainstream, as opposed to threatening it.”<sup>48</sup>

Although Lee's and (Academy Award nominee) John Singleton's films are the most familiar to the mainstream, other significant films that came out during this period include *House Party* (1990), *Car Wash* (1990), *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), *The White Girl* (1990), *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), *Livin' Large* (1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), *The Five*

*Heartbeats* (1991), *Talkin' Dirt After Dark* (1991), *True Identity* (1991), *House Party 2* (1991), *Strictly Business* (1991), *Juice* (1992), *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), *Deep Cover* (1992), *Boomerang* (1992), *BeBe's Kids* (1992), and *Poetic Justice* (1993).

Despite the enormous talent evinced in these years, Hollywood has always been more comfortable with the African American presence onscreen than with allowing too much creative control by an African American director's presence in the filmmaker's chair. This tendency proves to be true in spite of this film movement's prominence. At the end of his book *Framing Blackness*, film scholar Ed Guerrero expresses apprehension over the future of black film. Although the book was published in 1993, near the new black wave's peak, Guerrero saw the slowing of black film productions even then, noting that it had "hit the notorious glass ceiling in a double-sense; that is, black films are limited to roughly a dozen, mostly black-male-directed, productions a year, with the overwhelming majority of them relegated to budgets well below \$30 million."<sup>49</sup> Sadly, Guerrero's trepidation would be confirmed as Hollywood soon halted the cultivation of new black directors.

The vanguard of the black new wave, such as Spike Lee and John Singleton, still function in Hollywood; the difference today is that they often supplement their mainstream film works with other media fare, such as television specials, a medium with lower budgets and higher creative control. Lee's latest film and box office success, *Inside Man* (2006), while containing a definite political agenda, seemed to be loosely aimed more at the unpopular Bush administration but lacked the political depth and immediacy that characterized his previous work. In contrast, Lee's four-part, 255-minute HBO documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) was an overt indictment of FEMA, the Bush Administration, and the United States government. The lengthy program depicted the devastated post-Hurricane Katrina wasteland that had become New Orleans and the disenfranchised people left behind in the hurricane's tragic wake. The television documentary was also released the same year as *Inside Man*, perhaps demonstrating the tension between the steep demands of a commercial film market and the more insurgent potentialities of a different medium.

## WHAT'S BLACK ABOUT CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD?

It has now been over fifteen years since that prolific year of 1991, and almost one hundred years since the birth of Hollywood cinema. The state of mainstream African American film has changed significantly from both of these eras. The production of certain types of African American film for which the black new wave was known has been tempered, replaced by more traditional mainstream offerings. The palpable excitement and fervor that

came with the black new wave has now subsided, although remnants of its vitality still remain. Like the Blaxploitation films that came before it, its influence still persists—albeit in diluted forms. However, the time when black film was made for black audiences has passed. At this point, the critical analysis of African American mainstream images relies heavily on the onscreen talent rather than on black filmmakers.

Black celebrities have continued to appear onscreen—now more than ever before. Such stars as Jamie Foxx, Will Smith, Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and, more recently, Forest Whitaker have all been nominated for Academy Awards and, in the case of Washington, Whitaker, and Berry, won statuettes in the most coveted categories for actors. Much history and progress has transpired from the time when *The Birth of a Nation* swept the inchoate box office in 1915. The most easily recognizable Stepin Fetchits and the Aunt Jemimas of old Hollywood films have all but disappeared. But although it is undeniable that progress has been made, the stark limitations placed on African American actors also cannot be dismissed. The prominence of black actors in Hollywood seems to indicate a racial tolerance or acceptance of African Americans in general, but the roles that they are forced to play are more often than not prefigured by the industry's—and country's—inherent racism.

Frequently, black stereotypes have continued to persist, often by disguising themselves in modern dress, and have in fact appeared in some of the biggest mainstream fare. Popular films like *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), and *Traffic* (2000) base much of their human drama around familiar and problematic black archetypes. *The Green Mile*, for instance, is the story of John Coffey, a gentle black giant played by actor Michael Clarke Duncan, who is accused of raping and murdering two nine-year-old white girls. While in prison, the audience comes to love this child-like giant, learning that he is afraid of the dark and has magical healing powers that are naturally put in service to cure the white folk around him. As if this character were not problematic enough, he calls the prison guards around him “boss” and ultimately sacrifices himself, in spite of his innocence, for the benefit of the white characters. Undoubtedly, the film sought to provide a statement about racism, but this does not prevent it from simultaneously upholding and reinforcing the structures of racism. In fact, the stereotypes within the film, mainly the magical Negro and the tom, only reinforce age-old racist notions of how whites feel African Americans should act.

For these African American actors, these roles, although problematic, represent a potential for higher visibility. The overarching dilemma for these black actors, the industry, and American society in general is that the notion of normality is exclusively tied to whiteness. As George Lipsitz has insisted,

This whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with the all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, despite the prominence of many successful black stars, the state of the black actor is still characterized by exclusion—not so much from the screen, but from consideration for the kinds of roles that provide in-depth characterizations and attest to a character's humanity. Deplorably, these are the types of roles typically reserved for white actors. If offered at all to an African American actor, such a role will go to a cadre of well-established black stars, not an upcoming young talent. Oftentimes, the only available roles uphold racist or limited depictions of African Americans. Ultimately, this industry divide is just another way that Hollywood controls black images. Some black actors, however, have gained enough star power to cross this divide, Denzel Washington among them.

Washington, more than any other black star, has been the most recognizable and successful actor in contemporary African American cinema. His accolades include two Academy Awards: one for Best Supporting Actor in 1987 for *Glory* and the other for his villainous turn in 2001's *Training Day*. It is interesting to note that Washington's most critical acclaim comes in diametrically opposed roles. Washington, for quite some time, was typecast as Hollywood's black soulful hero. His characters, usually noble and idealistic heroes, have often engendered comparisons to Sidney Poitier. Indeed, as Donald Bogle notes, both Poitier and Washington's film personas were often the "paragons of decency and virtue without a possibly threatening or aggressive sexuality." In fact, despite Washington's box office power and appeal, roles that were originally meant to have romantic involvements with their white leading ladies were rewritten to purely platonic relationships. *Pelican Brief* (1993), for example, was based on the John Grisham best-selling novel that romantically linked its two protagonists together through an environmental legal brief and the ensuing conspiracy. Hollywood, nevertheless, rewrote their relationship, fearing that the black man/white woman coupling would offend mainstream sensibilities.<sup>51</sup>

Washington's role in Antoine Fuqua's *Training Day*, however, marked an unprecedented shift in his career. Washington played Alonzo Harris, a corrupt LAPD officer, whom the actor describes as a "thief, liar, killer and ego-maniac. He's a sick, sick man who has no heart."<sup>52</sup> Until this role, Washington was relegated a largely saintly figure in Hollywood cinema. The film's unblinking portrayal of Washington's character in all his complex and maniacal rage and vitriol showed that he was more than the classic villain. In effect, although the most simplistic of readings would dub

Washington's Alonzo Harris just one more "bad" representation in a long line of demonized African American men, Fuqua's film refuses such an easy categorization. Harris is a villain, to be sure, but his sheer complexity adds to the many different ways of being "black" rather than contributing to another one-dimensional positive or negative stereotype. Again, the fact cannot be discounted that if there were more roles that attested to the diversity of African Americans to begin with, the discussion over whether Harris was a positive or negative representation would be moot. After all, the reason white actors are allowed to venture toward any character without fear is because media displays whiteness in all its forms, un beholden to any stereotype.

Will Smith is another black actor who has climbed the ranks in Hollywood. With two Oscar-nominated performances in *Ali* (2001) and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2007), Smith's star power in the commercial industry rivals Washington's. Most of his roles have been diverse, though two of his films, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *Hitch* (2005) leave somewhat to be desired. Although the two settings of the films differ greatly, from 1917 to 1931 in the South and modern day Manhattan respectively, common underlying themes exist between the two. In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, although Smith plays the title character of Bagger Vance, the film is more

**Will Smith, J. Michael Moncrief, and Matt Damon in Robert Redford's 2000 film *The Legend of Bagger Vance*.**



*DreamWorks/Photofest*



focused on the true protagonist of story, onetime golf champion Rannulph Junuh, played by Matt Damon. The heart of the story revolves around Rannulph's attempts to regain his golf swing in an effort to save his girlfriend's father's golf resort. As if by magic, Smith's character appears quite mysteriously and offers to caddie for the struggling golfer. Besides being ahistorical (the film takes place during a time when the South was deeply segregated), the audience watches as Smith as he proceeds to "clean[s] the crud off Junuh's shoes and encourage[s] him while seeking to boost his spirits—and doing so while speaking in an old-style/movie dialect."<sup>53</sup> As *New York Post* critic Jonathan Foreman observed, "The sight of one of Hollywood's biggest black stars playing a caddie—and delivering worthy lines like 'sho is some storm a-brewing'—is not a little depressing."<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, Vance helps Damon's character regain his sexuality and reunites him with his love interest.

Just four years later, the modern romantic comedy *Hitch* repeated the same theme. Smith plays a "date doctor" named Hitch whose job is to teach men how to woo women. Throughout the film, Smith is suavely successful at his job, making an unattractive Kevin James attractive to beautiful white women, but not so triumphant at doing so for himself. Obviously, his talents are far more reliable when working to restore white masculinity. Eventually, however, Smith does end up with his love interest, played by Eva Mendes. Although the love interest marks a contrast from *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, both of these characters, at some point, serve to reinstate white masculinity to white men who have seemed to have lost it. These two films demonstrate once again that old stereotypes and ideologies have been modernized and updated, successful to such an extent that they can exist in the historical setting of a period drama and a light romantic comedy, plaguing even the biggest African American stars.

The progressive fact that Smith does indeed have a love interest in *Hitch* is somewhat undermined by the problematic factors in the studio's casting. When interviewed by *The Birmingham Post*, Smith explained Sony Pictures' decision to cast Cuban American actress Mendes: "There's sort of an accepted myth that if you have two black actors, a male and a female, in the lead of a romantic comedy, that people around the world don't want to see it. . . . So the idea of a black actor and a white actress comes up—that'll work around the world, but it's a problem in the U.S."<sup>55</sup> Smith's statement tellingly reveals the behind-the-scenes discrimination that occurs from the very beginning of the moviemaking process. Moreover, this statement demonstrates the orchestrated lack of visibility that has plagued black actresses in Hollywood for quite some time.

As noted previously, the majority portrayals of African Americans in cinema have been disproportionately male. Despite the popularity of black women's films in the 1990s such as *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) and *How Stella*

*Got Her Groove Back* (1998), there is a true lack of recent mainstream films that center around black women. It is for this reason that Halle Berry's Oscar win for *Monster's Ball* (2001) is so significant. As the first African American woman to win the coveted Best Actress award, Berry as a figure in this now—historically significant film is crucially important to examine. Before *Monster's Ball*, Berry's film career was not nearly so prestigious as her fellow Oscar winners. With a resume of questionable films like *Bulworth* (1998), which portrayed a group of "naïve, almost childlike black characters . . . [who] seemed capable of doing little more than celebrating their great white father figure"<sup>56</sup> and the glossy action-flick *Swordfish* (2001), Berry's film persona was overtly sexualized. Indeed, *Swordfish's* most famous moment was Berry's exploitative topless scene—a feat that would be repeated for *Monster's Ball's* sex scene.

Set in the Deep South, *Monster's Ball* is centered on the relationship between Berry's character, Leticia Musgrove, and a racist, white prison guard, played by Billy Bob Thornton. As the film progresses, the audience comes to discover that Leticia is the wife and then the widow of a convicted murderer whose execution Hank carries out. Despite this connection, the two protagonists meet by chance as Hank picks up Leticia and her obese, dying son, Tyrell from the side of the road. Hank drives them to a nearby hospital, where her son is pronounced dead on arrival. By this point, each of the two protagonists has experienced a tragedy—a death and a suicide of each their respective son's—that serves to seemingly bind them together in mutual commiseration. Despite the fact that Hank is fully aware of his complicit role in executing Leticia's husband, he proceeds to engage in a sexual relationship with her. It is during this process that Thornton begins his racial awakening and is ultimately reformed. By the end of the film, Leticia is startled to discover their tragic connection: Hank was her husband's executioner. Still, Berry's character does nothing, and the film ends as they continue their relationship. In conclusion, the audience is supposed to feel that the race relations of the South can be faithfully mended by the individual sympathies of shared experiences. However, the problematic elements and logic within this film are abundant.

The film positions itself as a salvation story of a racist Southerner who is redeemed by his tolerant relationship with (and sexual desire for) a black woman. But, in the end, *Monster's Ball's* main premise condones white male sexual fantasies for black women. Hank's sexual desire for Berry becomes so strong that he abandons his racist vitriol and begins his process of reformation. He expels his former racist self to the point that he banishes his racist father, Buck, to a nursing home, leaving him free to unabashedly engage in his sexual fantasies with Leticia. However, this can only happen once all the black men in the film, Leticia's husband and her son, have been murdered or have died. Problematically enough, their deaths propel

the story forward and provide the chance meeting. It is only after their deaths that Hank's transformation can take place. He essentially uses Leticia's body as redemptive force; his sexual desire for a black woman has in essence, cured him of his racist disease. The audience knows nothing of Berry's feelings over the revelation that Hank executed her husband and why she chooses to continue the relationship. It is obvious that Berry exists purely as a sexual object to be rescued, coddled, and consumed by a formerly racist white lover. Indeed, Hank's habitual enjoyment of chocolate ice cream within the film leaves little to be inferred.

Many have argued that sexual desire for the "other," or, in this case, black women, automatically absolves one from being racist. One only needs to be reminded that white slave owners frequently fulfilled their sexual desires for their female slaves while, at the same time, retaining their racist beliefs to know that this notion is disingenuous. Sexual desire does not exonerate one from upholding racist dogma, despite what *Monster's Ball* and the Academy might have audiences believe. In addition, if we were to take *Monster's Ball's* premise and reverse the roles with Julia Roberts as the widow and Denzel Washington as Hank, the film would mostly like spark outrage among mainstream viewers. The implications of this would obviously be different. Although fear of miscegenation clearly informs *Hitch's* on-screen relationships, it is evident that when a white man sexually desires a black woman, it is condoned for its racial progress and even lauded. Thus it is obvious once again that the racial politics of cinema manifest differently along gender lines as well as racial.

In examining these films, the blame for these images lies not with the actors who bring them to life onscreen but with the commercial film industry's inherent racism for prefiguring them. This is why at the 2002 Oscars, when these historic "firsts" were flaunted as the industry's advancements in racial equality, many African Americans were apprehensive. After all, one night of honor and victory cannot begin to undo decades of exclusion and oppression. Certainly, African Americans in Hollywood have been able to attain some measure of progress. Nevertheless, the constellations of power within media and American society still aim to restrict and control black images. Herman Grey points out that

"[a]s these media representations of blackness take form, disappear, and reappear, they call up histories, effects, sentiments, and desires. In this process, they seem to generate a certain political urgency for African Americans to interrogate the past critically, locate themselves in the present, and come to terms with their desires for the future."<sup>57</sup>

Thus, this chapter has attempted to interrogate the past while locating the present through African American mainstream cinema. The desires of the

future perhaps lie with the onslaught of viral videos, online posting, digital video cameras, and unprecedented access to millions of viewers. Venues outside the commercial film industry continue to represent interesting viabilities for black images. The bypassing of distributors and exhibitors no doubt holds the potential for the circulation of new representations while providing broader avenues of investigation for scholars. However, whether or not these will provide a contrast to the images we see now has yet to be determined.

Although this chapter's objective has been to provide an understanding of the African American relationship with mainstream cinema, it should be remembered that whether in distinctions of gender, class, or sexual orientation, the term African American contains in itself a diversity of identities that cannot be rendered into monolithic terms. Articulations of black experiences are immensely varied because of these intersections of identity. These considerations produce vast differences in positionalities and perspectives. Therefore, this chapter should serve as merely a springboard to inspire a more complex and in-depth exploration of African American cinema, as well as culture, in all its multiplicity.

## NOTES

1. Although Sidney Poitier won a Best Actor statuette in 1963 for his performance in *Lilies of the Field*, Washington is the first African American actor to have won two Oscars in annual competition.

2. "Halle Berry's Acceptance Speech," *BBC News*, Feb. 25, 2004, In Depth Oscars 2002, World Edition, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars\\_2002/1892608.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars_2002/1892608.stm) (accessed January 23, 2008).

3. Stuart Hall, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 468.

4. Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, eds. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 20.

5. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), xi.

6. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 10.

7. Ella Shohet and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 100, 104.

8. For a more detailed analysis of *Birth of A Nation*, refer to Daniel Bernardi's entry, "Blacks in Early Cinema," or Vincent R. Rocchio's *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood's Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

9. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 41.

10. Tommy L. Lott, "Hollywood and Independent Black Cinema," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 212.

11. Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 80.

12. Examples such as *Lilies of the Field* (1963) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) demonstrate Poitier's repetitive casting as the figure of the "race man."

13. Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 18.

14. Heated debates within the African American community over what constitutes positive black representations still persist today (for example, outcry over the fetishistically glamorized image of hip-hop, the characters in almost every Tyler Perry film, and so on). The underlying assumption among many prominent black cultural figures—that the immediate task of African American popular culture should be to "uplift the race," or to change the perceptions of blackness in the white American imagination—is still prevalent. Such arguments, while understandable given the denigration of black images perpetuated in history, should also be taken into consideration with thoughts that the "burden of representation" would and should be mitigated by a plurality of diverse images.

15. Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 81.

16. Lott, "Hollywood and Independent Black Cinema," 218.

17. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 86.

18. Lott, "Hollywood and Independent Black Cinema," 218.

19. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough*, 89.

20. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 86.

21. For a more detailed textual analysis of Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, see Mark A. Reid's *Redefining Black Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and Guerrero's *Framing Blackness*.

22. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 87.

23. In the opening of the film, we see the protagonist as a child who is seduced by a prostitute and subsequently dubbed Sweetback for his impressive sexual talent. Reared as a sexual performer in a brothel, Sweetback uses his sexual prowess to his advantage. In one scene, when challenged by a white motorcycle gang to do battle, the leader of the gang is revealed to be a woman. Thus, when prompted to choose his weapon, Sweetback chooses "f\*\*\*ing." The gang leader is so impressed by his sexual skill that she immediately releases him.

24. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 89.

25. Although protests of the day demonstrated that the black community was often polarized by class status, it also reflected the population's diversity. Ultimately, *Sweetback's* reputation as a revolutionary black film has only been cemented with time. Some of the same issues however, would later emerge from the appearance of the new black film wave of the 1990s as well.

26. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 159.

27. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough*, 90.

28. Lott, "Hollywood and Independent Black Cinema," 221.

29. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 90.

30. *Ibid.*, 70.

31. *Ibid.*, 111.

32. *Ibid.*, 159.

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33. Indeed, the so-called “Film School”—generation filmmakers Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg all benefited from the institutionalization of filmmaking during the 1960s. Their tenure at prestigious film schools such as UCLA and USC coincided with the racial politics of the 1960s and 1970s. But it wasn’t until after they graduated and gained entry to the industry that the gains of the Civil Rights movement took hold and spurred on a generation of black filmmakers, who proceeded into the filmmaking academy. This is also not to be confused with the “L.A. School” or the L.A. Rebellion” of the African American film/arts movement, which was the first wave of African American university-trained filmmakers. This movement, however, was strictly an independent film movement.

34. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough*, 25.

35. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 164–165.

36. *Ibid.*, 165.

37. For more on the mammy stereotype and Hattie McDaniel, refer to Bogle’s *Interpretive History* or Ingrid Bank’s chapter in this volume on “Black Women in Film.”

38. Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 155.

39. Vincent F. Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood’s Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 137.

40. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough*, 25.

41. Steven D. Kendall, *New Jack Cinema: Hollywood’s African American Filmmakers* (Silver Spring: J. L. Denner, Inc., 1994), 4.

42. Paul Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 126.

43. bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 71.

44. Cornel West, *Keeping the Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

45. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 356.

46. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough*, 29.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 28.

49. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 205.

50. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), vii.

51. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 424.

52. Paul Fischer, “Denzel Washington/*Training Day* Interview,” the Toronto Film Festival, March 3, 2008, <http://www.femail.com.au/denzelwashington.htm> (accessed Feb. 27, 2008).

53. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 431.

54. *Ibid.*, 431.

55. Jeanette Walls, “Was Race An Issue in ‘Hitch’ Casting?” *MSNBC*, Feb. 23, 2005, Entertainment/Gossip Section, online edition, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7019342/> (accessed Feb. 27, 2008).

56. Bogle, *Interpretive History*, 429.

57. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 162.

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## Oprah Winfrey

*Gladys L. Knight*

Oprah Winfrey debuted as the host and eponym of her talk show in the 1980s, beginning a spectacular domination of mainstream American culture that has lasted to this day. She is, without question, one of the most successful, powerful, and influential individuals in the world. She is also one of the richest. That she is the first African American woman to attain this status blasts the erroneous beliefs that barred women and people of color from positions of power for many centuries.

Winfrey's multiple enterprises include the still-running, highly rated talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; the bestselling *O Magazine*; Harpo Productions; a massively popular book club; a Web site; and two philanthropic organizations, the Angel Network and the Oprah Winfrey Foundations. Gracing the cover of *O Magazine*, Oprah Winfrey appears glamorous and aglow with confidence—a woman living the dream that she has always believed would come true. But Winfrey is no stranger to failure and tragedy and has often been the target of harsh public scrutiny and unkind parody.

Part of Winfrey's appeal stems from the fact that her public persona is that of a woman who pursues her passions. In so doing, she exposes what is most meaningful to her and invites other people to get involved. On her talk show, she regularly divulges weaknesses and personal tragedies. In her films, which are largely concerned with African American life, she reveals her pride in her racial heritage. Oprah's Book Club was formed because of Winfrey's desire to share her lifelong love of reading, as well as her belief that reading is a healing refuge in times of loneliness, heartache, and pain. Winfrey herself chooses the books that seem most poignant to her. Through her charity work and the social issues explored on her shows, she demonstrates her concern for the brokenhearted, the poor, the underprivileged, and the victimized. Winfrey's own life experiences have had a profound effect on her public journey of healing and transcendence. She is on a mission—perhaps a crusade—to empower others, particularly women and girls.

Oprah Winfrey at the 2005 ABC Winter Press Tour.



*ABC/Photofest*

## EARLY LIFE

Life began for Orpah Gail Winfrey on January 29, 1954, in Kosciusko, Mississippi. This was the first of three households in which she lived as a child. She was the only child born to Vernita Lee and Vernon Winfrey, who never married. Her great aunt chose her name from the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament. As the story goes, Orpah's name was changed to Oprah because that was what people called her, either mispronouncing or misspelling her name.

The town of Kosciusko was named after a Polish immigrant, Thaddeus Kosciusko, a celebrated veteran of the American Revolution who had purchased freedom for many slaves. Despite this progressive connection, the

town was still subject to the laws of the state that forcibly separated blacks from whites. Under Jim Crow laws, Oprah and her family and neighbors were not allowed to associate with whites. To brush up against or stare at a white person could lead to serious consequences. Lynching, defined as murder by hanging or other brutal methods, was still a very real fear in the 1950s, for African American men in particular. Winfrey's early experiences were a mixture of African American folk life, church, and seclusion.

In her earliest years, Oprah and her mother lived on a farm with her mother's parents, Hattie Mae and Earlist Lee, in an old ramshackle farmhouse. Hattie Mae and Earlist were both descendents of slaves and were accustomed to a simple country life. Hattie Mae made their clothes, did all of the washing by hand, tended to the garden and the animals, and cooked traditional southern African American foods—otherwise known as soul food: cornbread, ham hocks, greens, and eggs fried in leftover bacon fat were common.

When Oprah was four years old, Vernita moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in search of work. Like most African American women of the period, she found work as a domestic for white families. In Vernita's absence, Hattie Mae began instructing Oprah in the ways of day-to-day life on the farm. But Winfrey had her own thoughts about the usefulness of learning how to wash, lead the mooing cows to the pasture, and feed the pigs and chickens. As she walked to and fro from the well or did her chores, she may have comforted herself with the thought that she was destined for bigger things in life. She says that she had this feeling as early as she could remember.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE IN THE SOUTH IN THE 1950S

In her wildest dreams, Hattie Mae could never have imagined the life that her granddaughter eventually lived. Hattie Mae's life was steeped in the harsh realities of white racism, systematic oppression, and a lack of access to outside resources. In the 1950s, African Americans were still at the bottom of the heap of America's social system. For most of them, life meant unending poverty, a menial job, and humiliation whenever they crossed paths with whites.

In addition to the formal laws of segregation, there were informal rules, known as racial etiquette, that regulated relations and conduct between the two races. For example, African Americans could not argue or "sass" whites. African Americans had to step aside when a white person was on the sidewalk. In some counties, African Americans were not allowed to walk on sidewalks at all—they had to walk in the street. African Americans were referred to as "boy," "gal," "Uncle," or "Auntie," but they were forced always to refer to whites as "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Miss."

African Americans were virtually powerless. Economically, they were the poorest of the poor. Socially, they were looked down on by whites.

Politically, they had no voice. The low percentage of African American voters was, by today's standards, appalling. But it was not apathy that kept African Americans out of the polling booths of the 1950 and 1960s.

Voting, for blacks, was a harrowing experience. There was no such thing as a mundane trip to the registration office; registering to vote was fraught with obstacles. Discriminatory laws and practices required that African Americans pass a difficult exam and pay a poll tax. The strange practice of obligating African Americans to fill out a preliminary questionnaire, which was sometimes forwarded to local white supremacist organizations, often left new voters vulnerable to harassment and physical attack. Those who desired to exercise their constitutional right to vote ran the risk of finding themselves unemployed or homeless. Other African Americans did not even know that they had the right to vote.

Despite the harshness of life for African Americans in general and the humble environment in which she lived, Oprah grew to be proud—not ashamed—of her heritage. The richness of the culture, the strength and industriousness of the community, and the natural wonderment that she had for her surroundings created many fond memories of her life in Kosciusko. Winfrey has recalled the distinctly African American experience of her grandmother oiling her scalp with a hair dressing and the enticing smell of the rich traditional foods simmering in cast-iron pots. Not so pleasant are recollections of her scowling and distant grandfather and of the switch that her grandmother had cut from a bush or a tree—an instrument of punishment and social training that was ubiquitous in African American homes.

Reading, playing in a vivid and imaginative way, and going to church were experiences that figured prominently in Oprah's Mississippi childhood. There were no other little children near the grandparent's farm, so Oprah made friends with the animals and with the corncob doll crafted by her grandmother. She spent her free time playing in the fields, making up conversations with her doll and the animals. Despite her country ways, Hattie Mae knew that knowledge was power. That was why slaves had been forbidden to learn how to read in the previous century. Being able to read allowed individuals to function in mainstream life. And so Hattie Mae taught Oprah how to read.

One of the few places that offered rural African Americans in Kosciusko a social outlet was the Faith United Mississippi Baptist Church. It was there that the congregation could burst with emotion in response to the charismatic preacher, and it was there that Oprah had her first experience with public speaking. The congregation adored Oprah's recitations, and all the attention and encouragement bolstered her confidence.

Like many little girls, Oprah's sense of self-esteem was fragile. In those days, everyone on television, in magazines, or any other form of media was white. Images of African Americans were overwhelmingly negative, save for

few exceptions, such as Sidney Poitier. The emphasis on white superiority and black inferiority was psychologically harmful to African Americans. For Oprah, her desire to look like the famed young actress Shirley Temple prompted her to pin the sides of her nose together at night with her grandmother's clothespins.

When Oprah turned six, she moved to Milwaukee to be with her mother. Unfortunately, life with Vernita was harrowing, with only a few intermittent breaks of sunshine. For one thing, six-year-old Oprah found city life stultifying. Hard concrete and busy streets took the place of the soft earth, abundant trees, and the big clear skies of the country. She had few places to play and was frequently home alone (because mom was often away for work); having to compete with baby half-sister Patricia made life difficult. Vernita often made caustic statements such as "You think you're better than the other kids," because Oprah read voraciously.<sup>1</sup> The indomitable child, however, composed her own letter to the kindergarten teacher, suggesting that she be moved up to first grade, and it happened.

In contrast to this environment, Vernon Winfrey's home in Nashville, Tennessee, where Oprah went to live in 1962, was ideal. Oprah lived there through the school year. This arrangement helped Vernita get back on her feet. Vernon and his wife, Zelma, provided a healthy, stable, and disciplined environment. Once again, Oprah skipped another grade, going into the fourth grade at the age of eight. Her teacher, Mary Duncan, played an influential role in her young life. Oprah later asserted that "it was in her class that I really came into myself."<sup>2</sup> Winfrey was, however, taunted by the other school children because, as she later put it, she "believed [she] could do almost anything" and was not modest about it.<sup>3</sup>

Oprah grew more involved with her church during this time, becoming increasingly religious and honing her public speaking skills. She even embarked on a few modest philanthropic activities, such as raising money for the church. With this love of school and church, it is not surprising that the young Oprah considered becoming a teacher or a missionary when she grew up.

Oprah was back in Milwaukee during the summer of 1963. Vernita, still unmarried, now had a third child, a son named Jeffrey. Once again, life with her mother was not good. During the next six years, Oprah endured the trauma of repeated sexual assaults. Her nineteen-year-old cousin was the first one to rape her. There were subsequent attacks with other men. She told no one, but humiliation and anger swelled within her. Oprah withdrew, finding solace in books. She spent her preteen years at an inner-city school, detached from the rest of her peers.<sup>4</sup>

As a recipient of a scholarship—one of the offshoots of the affirmative action programs put in place during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency—for the ninth grade, Winfrey attended Nicolet High School in a white suburb.

For Oprah, it was an easy transition from the inner-city school to the upscale white school. And she made lots of friends. For the first time, she saw in the homes of her white friends luxuries that she had never known. However, the damage had been done by the sexual abuse. She started dating older men and was stealing from and lying to her mom. Vernita had a difficult time trying to manage Oprah.

Things got so bad that Oprah narrowly escaped a one-way trip to a special school for troubled youth. Instead, she was sent back to her father, who by now owned a barbershop and a store in Tennessee. On her return to her father's home, Oprah discovered that she was pregnant. She hid the pregnancy from her parents by wearing oversized clothes, but the truth was revealed when she prematurely gave birth. It was a difficult time, but Vernon and Zelma were supportive. The baby boy died some two weeks later.

But the experience became a watershed in Winfrey's life. Away from the abuse that she had experienced at her mother's home, she was able to make changes for the better in her life. She became a model student again—this time at the newly integrated East Nashville High School—and became one of the most popular young girls. She dated a popular boy, but their courtship was devoid of the fast-track experiences that she had known when she had lived with her mother.

Oprah went from one success to another in high school. She continued reading and speaking in public. She traveled to Hollywood to speak to a church and earned \$500 for her efforts. She was selected to be a representative at a White House Conference on Youth in Colorado. She joined the forensics team, was the vice president of the student body, and was chosen as Miss Black Tennessee. Finally, she was awarded a college scholarship when she won a speech contest sponsored by the Elks Club. But it was a mundane trip to WVOL, the local radio station, to request a donation for a March of Dimes Walk-a-Thon that was the turning point for Oprah.

## EARLY CAREER

The manager of the station saw at once that Oprah was going places that few African Americans had ventured. The impressive Oprah was instantly offered a part-time job with the radio station at \$100 a week. She took the job and kept it while attending Tennessee State University (TSU), a historically black institution.

That job, coupled with the on-campus trend toward militancy that marked the beginning of the Black Power Movement, set her apart from her classmates and created tensions. But Oprah did not feel the same animosity that others had toward whites. Unfazed by the pressures to conform, Oprah continued to pursue her ambitions.

Winfrey was the first African American to win the Miss Fire Prevention beauty pageant. In her second year at TSU, she was hired as the first African American anchor at WTVF, making \$15,000 a year. The viewers quickly fell in love with Oprah's warm and easy style. But, as her notoriety increased, so did criticism, and she became known on campus as a "token." That she moved comfortably and excelled in a world dominated by whites perplexed and exasperated an Afrocentric culture that was critical and suspicious of the white establishment. The white audiences, on the other hand, took her to their hearts, apparently with few exceptions.

In 1976, Oprah put college on hold to accept a better job offer with WJZ in Baltimore, Maryland. This job was likely the result of the station's deliberate program to diversify the field of television. The experience was a disaster. Winfrey's charming banter and folksy ways were miscast in a big city where audiences were used to an emotionally detached anchoring style. Winfrey's appearance was another point of contention. Management complained that her hair was too thick, her nose too wide, and her eyes set too far apart. Oprah was forced to have her hair chemically straightened by a white person who was unfamiliar with the care of black hair. As a result, her hair fell out and she had to wear a wig. This glaring instance of racism was shocking and demoralizing.

In 1977, while still in Baltimore, Winfrey received the chance to co-host with Richard Sher on *People Are Talking*. This job was a better fit. While co-hosting this show, she met her longtime best friend, Gayle King, who went on to play an integral role in Winfrey's life. She saw Oprah through many a bad relationship as well as personal trials and tribulations; their relationship afforded Winfrey an intimacy that was hard to find in what had become a very high-profile and famous life.

In 1984, Winfrey moved to Chicago to host her own talk show. She went on to best one of the most popular talk shows of the time, *The Phil Donahue Show*, and to lay the foundation for her media dynasty. Starting out as the host of *A.M. Chicago*, she banked an eye-catching \$200,000 a year. *A.M. Chicago* was a good choice for Winfrey. She could be herself and did not have to submit to impossible beauty standards. Her personable style caused the ratings to soar, despite the fact that she had put on weight. Winfrey's weight gain and subsequent yo-yo dieting were, for a while, a media obsession, but, in the end, they in no way deterred her from building an empire.

## OPRAH'S EMPIRE

### *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

The syndication of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1986 (the year that she got her degree from TSU), catapulted Oprah to national popularity and heralded a new era in talk shows on television. The ultimate success of

the show was attributed to a new format, revolving around self-improvement issues that Winfrey instituted in the early 1990s. She wanted to move away from the kind of programming that was dubbed “Trash TV,” which resorted to lurid sensationalism to draw ratings. As a result, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* has topped the list of talk shows for twenty consecutive years.

At the heart of Winfrey’s success is her groundbreaking approach. From the start, Winfrey was notorious for her teary and demonstrative interviews, as well as her uncanny ability to get her guests to open up. Likewise, her personal disclosures—about her weight and about her experiences with racism and sexual assault—made the viewers flock to the screen.

Although *The Oprah Winfrey Show* still draws big-name celebrities such as the Back Street Boys, Jennifer Aniston, Tom Cruise, and Jamie Foxx, it is primarily a sanctum for emotional healing and personal empowerment. The show serves as a vehicle to address important—and sometimes controversial—issues such as AIDS, eating disorders, domestic violence, and child abuse. Lighter topics—beauty, food, money, and romantic relationships—are also explored.

### ***Acting, Film, and Television***

Most people were surprised when Oprah Winfrey was cast as the robust and strong-willed Sofia in Steven Spielberg’s movie production of Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Color Purple*. Winfrey was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. It is not a well-known fact, but Winfrey had also wanted to be an actress when she was growing up.

Acting was everything that Winfrey imagined it to be and more. Among her noteworthy roles were made-for-television movies such as *Before Women Had Wings* (1997), *There Are No Children Here* (1993), *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), and, on the big screen, the movie *Beloved* (1998). In 2005, Winfrey produced the musical version of *The Color Purple*, which received glowing reviews and attendance. Fantasia Barrino, a 2004 *American Idol* winner, starred in the Broadway production in New York City.

*Beloved*, a film based on the Pulitzer Prize–winning novel by Toni Morrison, was produced by Winfrey’s own Harpo Productions (Harpo is Oprah spelled backward). Through Harpo Productions, Winfrey has gone on to produce a host of shows, documentaries, and other projects, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005), *The Great Debaters* (2007), *Dr. Phil*, *The Rachael Ray Show*, a talk radio program called *Oprah & Friends*, and a recording label, Harpo Records.

In the new millennium, Winfrey’s ventures expanded to include television networks. For a while, Winfrey was an investor in the Oxygen network,



which offered programming for women. There is a plan underway for a forthcoming network, Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), which will broadcast programs dealing with the type of self-improvement skills that are often featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

### **Literature**

Oprah's Book Club is a mega success. Winfrey frequently recommends literary novels, such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, novels by William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaneys*. Winfrey's inclusion of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* stirred some controversy when it was found out that he had embellished some passages in the book. In 2006, Oprah famously confronted Frey on one of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episodes.

*O Magazine* debuted in 2000. In each issue, Oprah includes a section where celebrities disclose their own favorite books. Bulkier than traditional magazines, *O Magazine* contains a wealth of information on such topics as health, food, money, and relationships, as well as inspirational essays and tidbits.

### **Wealth and Philanthropy**

Billionaire Winfrey gets top billing as the richest and most philanthropic African American in American history. Needless to say, Winfrey leads an enviable and glamorous life. She has acquired a great deal of property, including homes in Chicago, New Jersey, Miami, Colorado, and a sprawling estate that she named "The Promised Land" in California.

The Promised Land is reminiscent of the biblical haven that was promised to the enslaved Israelites. For African American slaves, the term also symbolized the regions of the North, where slavery had been abolished. Following the abolition of slavery in the South, the North continued to be a symbol for blacks who were still economically, socially, and politically oppressed.

Winfrey herself is a symbol of worldly success, achievement, and opportunity. To her credit, she is extremely conscientious about both her role and her wealth. Through her organizations (such as the Angel Network and The Oprah Winfrey Foundation), private contributions, and the gift-giving carried out on her talk show, she has made an impact on the world. Winfrey has established schools in foreign countries, provided Christmas gifts to impoverished children, and more. In 2007 she opened the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, near Johannesburg in South Africa.

**Black Consciousness**

That Oprah Winfrey established a school in South Africa should come as no surprise to anyone who is aware of her pride in her heritage. In 1993 Winfrey addressed the graduating seniors of Spellman College, an all-black private institution for African American women in Atlanta, Georgia. The women wore black robes with bright kente cloths—a traditional Ghanaian fabric worn during important ceremonies—draped around their shoulders. Foregoing makeup and wearing a black robe, Winfrey blended perfectly with the graduating seniors, thus punctuating their shared identity. When she spoke, she infused her phrases with black southernisms such as “y’all” and addressed the graduates as “sisters.”

The preceding anecdote illustrates what Eva Illouz, author of *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery*, describes as Oprah’s ability to “navigate[] within and between worlds.”<sup>5</sup> Winfrey does this effortlessly.

Although Oprah Winfrey displays a more unracialized persona to the general public and on her talk show, this does not mean that she discounts her racial identity and heritage. If anything, she celebrates it and has done much to popularize African American heroes, culture, and experiences. Examples include her promotion of African and soul food recipes and African American films that address slavery and depict the familiar rural life that she experienced as a child. She exalts in her legacy and publicly affirms historical African American figures.

Winfrey repeatedly and consistently gives back to the African American community. As the sign that marks the spot where Winfrey lived in Mississippi asserts, she has “never forgot or overlooked her heritage and has been a regular supporter of folks back home as well as a role model to much of America.”<sup>6</sup> Winfrey donates large amounts of money to historically black colleges and universities, such as Morehouse College and Howard University. For her book club, she chooses African American authors such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Ernest J. Gaines. In 2002, Winfrey co-hosted Dorothy Height’s ninetieth birthday and donated a handsome sum to the National Council of Negro Women (Dorothy Height was a prominent leader in the organization). In 2006, Winfrey honored twenty-five notable African American women from various fields at a three-day gala event called “The Legend’s Ball.”

**Personal Life**

Much of what is known about Winfrey’s private life she has willingly—for the most part—disclosed to her television audience. She has never been married, but she has been in a committed relationship with a successful businessperson, Stedman Graham, for more than twenty years. She met

Graham in 1984, shortly after her arrival in Chicago, at a special function. Oprah Winfrey has no children, but she has famously said that the school that she recently inaugurated in South Africa has more than filled that role.

### *Influence*

The young South African girls who cluster around Winfrey in the photos appear almost reverent in their adoration. Anyone who has ever attended an Oprah Winfrey conference bears witness to the fact that Oprah has a dramatic impact on individuals: at the nationwide conferences, women morph into frenzied teenagers as if at a rock concert.

Winfrey's status as cultural icon is also illustrated by the fact that, in 1998, beef sales suspiciously plummeted when, responding to alleged questionable practices in the American beef industry, she stated that she would not eat beef anymore. And if that was not convincing, consider that she and her guest, Howard Lyman, were promptly sued by Texas cattlemen. Winfrey was found not liable to damages.

Winfrey's endorsement has been known to produce instant sensations. Her approval has catapulted the careers of individuals such as psychologist Phil McGraw, financial expert Suze Orman, and fitness and diet guru Bob Greene. Few, like Gayle King, whom Winfrey helped produce her own show, did not do as well. In 2007, Winfrey's reception at a rally in South Carolina nearly upstaged presidential hopeful Barack Obama.

Winfrey's influence extends to other areas as well. When she recommends an author, book sales soar. She has influenced the way people think, talk, and relate to one another so much so that new terms, such as the "Oprah effect" and "Oprahfication," have been added to dictionaries of modern English usage.

### **REACTIONS TO THE OPRAH PHENOMENON**

Winfrey's seemingly effortless climb to success has been bombarded with plenty of criticism, bashing, and taunting—much of which reflects the sexism, classism, and racism that is still prevalent in American society. In the 1990s, the popular comedy show *In Living Color* parodied Winfrey's weight gain and emotive style. Now that Oprah maintains a toned and fit frame, it is no longer popular to make fun of her physical appearance. But, as with any famous person, there will always be detractors.

*The Man Show*, a comedy television show on Comedy Central, produced a series of segments in which comedians in blackface impersonate a fictionalized relationship between Winfrey and Stedman, presenting him as a man who is physically bound and imprisoned by her. The simulation of a blackface minstrel show is itself problematic. Blackface is a century-old

racist theatrical style in which whites painted their faces black and grossly caricatured African American song, dance, and behavior. The practice stopped in the midtwentieth century. Valerie Palmer-Mehta describes *The Man Show* skits as an attempt by white men to portray Winfrey as the stereotypical black matriarch: a type of women who are perceived to be “too aggressive, and as a result, emasculate their men.”<sup>7</sup>

During one conversation on the show, comedians vented about Winfrey’s influence. Comments such as “This Oprah needs to do a little less brainwashing and a little more sock-washing,” and “We are here today to reclaim the airwaves, to take back the medium we invented” tellingly demonstrate what Palmer-Mehta asserts are malignant attitudes posed as harmless jokes.<sup>8</sup> Palmer-Mehta believes that this sort of talk and derogatory parodying is used because “the hegemonic male has been compelled to respond to the breakdown of white male normativeness and, in some instances, to create new strategies in the struggle for dominance.”<sup>9</sup>

White males, as represented in *The Man Show*, are not the only segment of the population to find fault with Oprah Winfrey. Rap artist Ice Cube felt slighted because Oprah Winfrey did not invite him to be a guest on her show. But Winfrey has, as usual, her reasons—primarily because she does not condone the demeaning and sexist language and racial pejoratives that are common in rap and hip-hop lyrics. Weblogs went ablaze when it was discovered that the popular rap star 50 Cent called Oprah an Oreo, meaning that she was black on the outside, white on the inside. Many male bloggers have joined in the discussion by opining that she is a sellout and that she cannot relate to the African American community.

Others jab at Winfrey’s contributions to African American film. Don Thomas, in an article in the *New York Beacon*, wrote that “it’s about time for [Oprah Winfrey] to put aside the torn and tattered mammie-made-dresses, raggedy-ann-matted-hairdos . . . and start showing our African American women, men and yes! children too, that all of them aren’t living in the depth of poverty and despair and broken marriages.”<sup>10</sup> That many of the films portray strong women and weak or negative African American men has been a common complaint for others in the African American community.

African American women tend to side with Winfrey—particularly women who also happen to belong to the middle and upper classes. These women generally recognize and affirm her accomplishments. Johnetta B. Cole, the former president of Spellman College, strung a litany of accolades on Winfrey before she gave the 1993 commencement address. Women like Bonnie Pinckney, a retired professional and leader in the African American community in Tacoma, Washington, echo Winfrey’s message and tout her as one of the greats in African American history. Wanda Muhammad, in an article in the *Chicago Independent Bulletin*, states that

Oprah “lets every Black woman know that there is no limit to what a woman can do.”<sup>11</sup> Organizations such as Rich Black Girls position Winfrey as the poster woman for success and emulation.

White women are, by far, Winfrey’s biggest fans. Linda Kay, who wrote “My Mom and Oprah Winfrey: Her Appeal to White Women” suggests that what white women like so much about Oprah is her ability to build connections with women from different backgrounds, to create intimacy, and to empower them to be their best.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, when, in 2007, Oprah publicly endorsed Barack Obama, some white women were upset that she chose to support a black man over Hillary Clinton, a white woman.

Tarshia L. Stanley, who wrote “The Specter of Oprah Winfrey: Critical Black Female Spectatorship,” applauds Oprah’s manifold successes but scrutinizes her as well. She argues that “her shows are rarely about issues specific to black women” and that “it is uncommon for the expert psychiatrists, life coaches, and panelists to be black women.”<sup>13</sup> Stanley is also concerned that Winfrey’s television persona is that of a stereotypical “mammy.” This is defined as an African American female slave who “nurtured dominant society” and “suckled children, gave sage advice, fixed wonderful meals, exhibited exceptional loyalty, and as a result, was often the family confidant.”<sup>14</sup> This, she suggests, is troublesome because it reinforces negative and stereotypical race relations.

Even in the realm of religion and spirituality, Winfrey is frequently put under the microscope. Through multiple media, Winfrey espouses a non-traditional belief system that, as scholar Denise Martin describes in “Oprah Winfrey and Spirituality,” “reveals a blend of African, African American, Eastern, and metaphysical philosophical and religious traditions.”<sup>15</sup> Because Oprah’s influence over American culture is so strong, her religious views concern some people—especially those in traditional religions who oppose New Age and other unconventional forms of spirituality.

Criticism is no stranger to Oprah Winfrey. She has dealt with it along the journey of her rise to stardom and power. The tumult of criticism appears to compound, not detract from, the glamour and adoration of this twenty-first-century icon as she continues to make an indelible mark on society as a woman and as an African American.

## NOTES

1. Illene Cooper, *Oprah Winfrey: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: Viking Press, 2007), 28.

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3. *Ibid.*, 36.

4. *Ibid.*, 43.

5. Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 26.

6. Cooper, *A Twentieth-Century Life*, 18.

7. Valerie Palmer-Mehta, "The 'Oprahization' of America: *The Man Show* and the Redefinition of Black Femininity," in *The Oprah Phenomenon*, eds. Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 77.

8. Ibid., 65.

9. Ibid., 81.

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11. Wanda Muhammad, "A Woman's Heart: In Defense of Oprah," *Chicago Independent Bulletin*, July 20, 2006, 7.

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13. Tarshia L. Stanley, "The Specter of Oprah Winfrey: Critical Black Female Spectatorship," in *The Oprah Phenomenon*, Harris and Watson, 44.

14. Ibid., 45.

15. Denise Martin, "Oprah Winfrey and Spirituality," in *The Oprah Phenomenon*, Harris and Elwood, 147.



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# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POPULAR CULTURE**

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**Edited by Todd Boyd**

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# Introduction

## AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

The argument can be made that it is in the broad area of popular culture that African Americans have had their greatest and most profound effects on American society. This is most certainly the case from the beginning of the twentieth century on. My intention is not to discount the role of the social and the political in contextualizing the African American experience, but to point out the overwhelming influence that popular culture has had in shaping the image of African Americans internally and in the larger society.

The relationship between African Americans and various forms of popular culture—such as music, sports, film, and television—is both complicated and congratulatory. Relative to this relationship is the way in which, over time, certain issues have evolved while other issues—such as the need for African Americans to control the means of cultural production, and the continued prevalence of certain stereotypes—in spite of the particular form of culture in question. Interestingly enough, these various forms of popular culture have often been written about and discussed exclusively of one another. I have long been a proponent of discussing these forms of culture as part and parcel of a larger body of work defined collectively as African American popular culture rather than limiting the influence of one form exclusively to its own domain. It makes sense that what is happening at a given time in film, for instance, may be influenced by what is taking place in the world of music. On the other hand, each medium requires that specific attention be paid to it in order to determine what is going on internally within that specific field of inquiry.

It is important to point out that in discussing popular culture, I am concerned with the culture consumed by “the people,” as it were. Some may find the exclusion of literature from these volumes to be an omission, but it is the point of view of this project that much has been written about literature but little penned about African American representation in less well-regarded genres such as comic books that nonetheless deserve our attention. In some ways, my distinctions are motivated by class concerns that have often tended to exclude the “popular” in popular culture when celebrating those works that have animated discussions about African

American identity over the years. This is not to dismiss the impact of a Langston Hughes or Toni Morrison as much as it is to recognize the fact that those watching a boxing match or a Blaxploitation film could indeed be excluded from discussions that might overlook such endeavors because of their overtly popular nature. It is this populist appeal that underscores the aim and scope of articles selected for this series of volumes.

For many years, African Americans were simply objects within popular culture whose representation tended to be quite stereotypical and especially problematic. At a certain point though, African Americans attempted to harness the means of production and create their own representations instead of being represented by others. This is the point at which things began to get interesting. For example, it is the utterly hideous and overtly racist representation of African Americans in a monumental film like D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) that creates the space for the beginning of an independent Black film movement, a movement that began with people such as Emmett J. Scott, Oscar Micheaux, and George and Nobel P. Johnson and continued up to such a prolific and contemporary mainstream figure as Spike Lee.

The tragedy and the triumph of African American imagery in popular culture is a situation where the two seemingly opposite poles are often interwoven. A good example of this can be found in the reasoning surrounding baseball player Jackie Robinson's integration of Major League Baseball in 1947—the point here being that there would have been no need for Robinson to break the “color line” in baseball had there not been a policy of racial segregation instituted in the first place. As this example indicates, African Americans in popular culture have often found themselves operating somewhere between the reality of racism and the possibilities of redemption through cultural engagement.

To this end, the core of African American cultural expression has often been located in music, which is itself an extension of the oral tradition that has long defined the Black presence in American society. A discussion of American music is a discussion that must recognize the centrality of African American music in this context. To exclude African American music from this discussion ultimately means that no discussion can take place.

The various forms of Black music—from gospel and the blues to jazz, soul, and, more recently, hip hop—have helped define the culture over time and have also provided a running soundtrack to American life. Black music, in the forms of blues and rhythm and blues, was the original source for what would eventually become “rock 'n' roll,” a popular but derivative genre of music that went on to reach mainstream mass appeal—often at the expense of its Black roots. The everlasting influence of music has been represented over time in phrases like “the Jazz Age,” the role of bebop in defining the “Beat Generation,” the place of both gospel music and



Motown in the Civil Rights movement, and the transformation of American culture brought by hip hop in contemporary society, among many other examples. The joys and pain, the triumphs and tribulations—all have been expressed both in and by the music. A list of social, political, and economic issues have been uniquely represented by the various sounds that emerge from the oral tradition. The music has served to inspire, inform, soothe, and enrage all those who might choose to listen, as well as all those preferring to ignore what was going on but unable to get away from the prevalence of the particular music in question. The role of Black radio at various points in history has helped to spread this music while also serving as an important nexus between the culture and the community in the process. Black music is a life force as well as a source of history, and the influence of this music has been felt throughout the culture.

If music represents the heart and soul of Black popular culture, sports represents the body itself. The success and struggles of African Americans in sports helps provide a physical example of the long, arduous journey that Black people have traveled over time in America. From once being excluded from certain sporting activities to now being the standard by which others measure their success, Black athletes have served a vital role in pushing the social and political boundaries that have often limited Black advancement in society.

The success of such a great boxer as Joe Louis and such a great sprinter as Jesse Owens helped solidify America's image and position in the world during the lead-up to World War II. Yet neither of these figures was afforded the treatment of a first-class citizen after their athletic success was no longer needed for the country's uplift. The aforementioned Jackie Robinson was successful at integrating baseball well before the public schools were desegregated and before the Civil Rights movement had gained national attention. Some might even call this "Act One" of what would become the Civil Rights movement, helping to bring attention to the push for social justice on a national stage in an otherwise unjust society.

There is perhaps no better example of the shift in attitude about Black athletes in America than the saga of Muhammad Ali. The gentleman originally known as Cassius Clay was one of the most hated Americans in the turbulent 1960s because of his membership in the controversial Nation of Islam, and especially because of his refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam War. Ali was stripped of his title, his passport was taken, and his ability to make a living was seriously denied based on such actions. Over time, however, Ali prevailed in the courts and in the ring as well. Eventually his triumphant story caused a new generation to begin reconsidering his legacy in the 1990s—so much so that he is often considered one of America's greatest heroes and most influential icons in the present. Yet, for many African Americans, Ali was always a hero who stood up for what he

## x Introduction

believed, who spoke his mind, and who used his status as a prominent athlete to push for social change.

Since the heyday of Ali in the 1960s and 1970s, Black athletes have transcended new heights, becoming successful corporate sponsors and cultural icons of the highest order. This transition is best exemplified by Michael Jordan, whose incredible skill set and success as a basketball player was his passport to an unprecedented reign as a global sports and cultural icon in the 1980s and 1990s. In his time, Jordan was embraced across the racial spectrum, but there were also many African Americans who felt that Jordan should have used his position to further political issues as Ali had done before him. But Jordan was of a different era and generation from Ali. His across-the-board appeal and monumental success set new standards for Black athletes and the role of athletics in the larger society. Figures like Jordan help make sports an integral area of popular culture, their images moving freely through so many different areas within the culture itself.

In contemporary society, some African American entrepreneurs now occupy places in the sports world other than just participating as athletes—for example, figures like Robert Johnson, founder of the BET network and the owner of the NBA's Charlotte Bobcats. Johnson's success demonstrates the link between entertainment and sports, thus fully foregrounding the importance of popular culture as a vehicle, as well as the upward mobility of African Americans now having a hand in the ownership of teams, as opposed to simply being players. The presence of a prominent figure from the hip-hop world, such as mogul Jay-Z, who owns portions of the New Jersey Nets, is but another example of the link between various spheres of popular culture and the existence of those who now have enough resources to be capital investors as well. Many African Americans have also moved into the executive suites of various teams and assume the roles of managers and coaches as well. Though there is still a lot of room to grow in terms of full Black participation in all levels of the sporting world, progress has been made since the racially problematic days of Owens, Louis, and Robinson.

In the worlds of film and television, African Americans have fared somewhat less well than their counterparts in music and sports, although the presence of African Americans in these venues has been something of note throughout the history of both. The visibility and influence of media has meant a constant struggle over issues of representation as it pertains to African Americans. In addition to the above-mentioned Micheaux and his fledgling efforts as an independent filmmaker, other African Americans such as Spencer Williams and, later, Melvin Van Peebles used the screen as a way of representing their own version of Black life in America. Van Peebles and his provocative work *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) took the notion of independent cinema to uncharted territory with a stunning

political critique that spoke to the sentiment of many people invested in the ideology of Black nationalism. The film represented a moment when culture and politics tended to work hand in hand. Hollywood took its cue from Van Peebles's critical and financial success and began what came to be known as the Blaxploitation movement, which defined Black presence in the 1970s. For the first time, cinema assumed a unique position among other aspects of Black culture in which visual representation came to be debated for its central role in defining African Americans relative to the larger society.

In 1986 filmmaker Spike Lee released his debut feature *She's Gotta Have It* and in so doing revived the Black independent film movement. Lee, with his shrewd marketing skills, tapped into the emerging sentiment of hip-hop culture and went on to redefine what it meant to be a Black filmmaker, managing to get his films made by the mainstream Hollywood studio system and maintain his own unique style at the same time. After Lee's success, several other young Black filmmakers—Robert Townsend, Reginald and Warrington Hudlin, John Singleton, and Allen and Albert Hughes, among others—began making their own way into Hollywood, turning the late 1980s and early 1990s into an extremely fertile period for African American images on film.

In addition to African American filmmakers attempting to control the means of production, the overall image of African Americans in Hollywood has long been an issue. Demeaning stereotypes often accompanied actors such as Stepin Fetchit and Hattie McDaniels in the 1930s; an actor such as Sidney Poitier enjoyed groundbreaking success in the 1960s, in more recent times, Denzel Washington's critically acclaimed performances have garnered Oscars, and the financial clout of Will Smith has made a mark on box-office proceeds. The historical evolution of the African American image in Hollywood is a journey filled with peaks and valleys, often defined by promises of inclusion set against a tradition of exclusion.

To the extent that African Americans in film have been defined by a conflicted history, something similar can be said about the role that African Americans have played on television. African Americans on film and in television have functioned differently from those in sports or music. Issues of representation, especially pertaining to stereotypes, for instance, continue to animate discussions about both film and television; yet the desire for dramas about African Americans on television has been the consistent cry as well. Many regard television's focus on Black situation comedies limiting and especially problematic. Though African Americans have long used stand-up comedy as an effective forum for the dissection of racial politics, the limitations inherent to confining Black television representation primarily to the genre of the situation comedy remains in question. Here the focus is on genre. Comedies have often tended to feature Black

performers in roles that are taken less than seriously, thus the desire to see a broader palette for African American images remains a demand put forth by the offended party.

For African Americans on television, Bill Cosby tends to function in a manner similar to Sidney Poitier on film. Bill Cosby made a name for himself as the first African American in a starring role on television with *I Spy* in the 1960s, his animated cartoon *Fat Albert* in the 1970s, and his mega-hit *The Cosby Show*, which dominated 1980s network television, revived the sitcom, and became in the process one of the most important television programs ever. Since that time though, much discussion has taken place about what was not being represented on television—rather than what was.

The 1970s also featured several prominent African American sitcoms, including *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. *The Flip Wilson Show*, an hour-long variety show, revolved around the many personas of comic Flip Wilson. The ground breaking miniseries *Roots* was another landmark television event during this decade. Based on the best-selling book by Alex Haley, *Roots* unfolded over seven nights in 1977 and traced the history of Haley's family from its African roots to its enslavement in America and the resulting aftermath. This popular narrative exposed many Americans to the horrors of slavery for the first time and also sparked an interest in genealogy as people from all races became interested in tracing their own roots. In the 1960s, television played a vital role in broadcasting the pivotal moments of the Civil Rights movement, and the 1970s inaugurated a fertile period for Black representation on television. Since that time, some might say that little has changed in these representations, even though the landscape of television has broadened substantially since then.

The proliferation of cable ushered in the era of Black Entertainment Television (BET), a network originally owned by Robert Johnson. This all-Black cable channel, long controversial for its heavy emphasis on hip-hop music videos, infomercials, and religious programming, was the result of Johnson's strategy of maximizing profit, though many of his critics felt that the network should be a venue for education, filling in the blanks left by the exclusion of African American representation on other networks. More recently, the cable network TV1 debuted in 2004, part of the media empire of Cathy Hughes, a prominent and successful African American woman who also owns the radio conglomerate Radio One.

One of the most significant figures in the history of television has been Oprah Winfrey. As an African American woman, Winfrey developed a massive following from the mid-1980s forward based on her extremely popular television program; from this, she has branched out into other areas of the culture—film, magazines, theater—creating a pervasive brand name that has few peers throughout the larger history of American popular culture. Winfrey's popularity has been so broad-based that she decided to use her

weighty mass appeal to endorse and campaign for Illinois senator Barack Obama in his historic quest for the presidency in 2008.

To the extent that popular culture is produced and consumed, its ability to reach the hearts and minds of common people is illuminating. To trace the history of African Americans through the twentieth century is to observe the drama, comedy, politics, and soul of Black cultural expression. When focusing on several different modes of representation, from early silent film to theater and from the Delta blues to hip-hop and beyond the breadth and depth of the Black experience is evident in all its attendant celebration and controversy. The contents of these volumes cut across medium, genre, and style to be both focused and eclectic. It is in the accumulation of these individual parts as a whole that we may begin to recognize the many common themes that animate this uniquely American set of circumstances, located deep within the African American existence.

*Dr. Todd Boyd*  
May, 2008  
Los Angeles, CA

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# Black Female Athletes

*Ange-Marie Hancock*

One week after calling the predominantly black Rutgers University women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos," CBS Radio shock jock Don Imus was fired. Debates in the media, politics, and sports have often focused on either the sexism of the comment or the racism of the comment, depending on the context and the interlocutor. On the Internet, bloggers focused on sexism decried overattention to race, and those focused on racism decried overattention to gender. Yet the black female athletes at the center of the storm possess what black feminist theorists conceptualize as a "both/and identity": both black and female. In this sense, how could anyone consider the issue as solely racial or solely gendered?

Following Don Imus's comments, the Rutgers team, a 2007 Final Four participant, was faced with an opportunity that often eludes black female athletes: increased sovereignty of social construction. This chapter analyzes the relationship between black female athletes and African American popular culture using the frameworks of intersectionality and social construction. In so doing, it traces specific athletes and confronts the discontinuities between the social construction of black female athletes as a group and the reality of their lives in college and professional contexts.

## BEYOND TRADITIONAL IDENTITY POLITICS

Intersectionality has emerged over the past twenty years as a compelling response to the critiques and claims of homogenous race-based and gender-based identity politics. First and most important, intersectionality has emphasized the simultaneous and interacting effects of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation as categories of difference that shape both personal identity and material group outcomes. Intersectional perspectives clearly recognize that the Don Imus flap cannot easily be categorized as solely racial or solely gendered. The members of the Rutgers women's team face social norms and athletic academic structures that are both

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gendered and raced as they navigate the world, before and after the radio host's comments.

This early claim of “both/and” evolved from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black women writers such as Maria Miller Stewart and Anna Julia Cooper. In the twenty-first century, however, intersectionality has grown beyond a single claim of “both/and” identity—articulated by black women and other women of color around the world—to an emphasis on the ways in which institutional structures and identities interact to produce differential material outcomes for groups. It is this interaction—between individuals (both as individuals and as members of groups) and the institutional practices, norms, and structures—that produces the culture in which we live. More often than not, this interaction is neither neat nor unidirectional in its influence. Cultural production is a dynamic process that involves elements of opportunity for liberation and oppression at multiple levels of analysis. Even as individuals are exercising their freedom to participate in American cultural discourse, the cultural impact at the level of the group or the institution may reinforce the oppression of their compatriots. This tension continues to haunt analyses of black female athletes, forcing a level of complexity that often escapes treatments of them as solely raced or gendered.

### SOVEREIGNTY OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

In black women's studies, a great deal of attention has been paid to the degree to which black women lack the power to influence the stereotypes and public identities in popular culture that play a role in their lives. Whether through interviews, discourse analysis, document analysis, or personal narrative, black women have long confronted the publicity of their bodies in a way that varies greatly from the standard scripts of either black men or white women.

Black female athletes at the college and professional level often confront the controlling images of the “jezebel” and “black lady” that police their behavior and shape their personal interactions with the sports institutions and economic structures that control what is disseminated through the media to the public. The “jezebel” image, one that has roots in U.S. slavery, was originally used to justify the rape of black female slaves by white men in power. The publicity of black women's bodies on the slave auction block was attributed to the lascivious nature of black women rather than to the political and economic practices of slavery as an institution. This sexualization was ironically juxtaposed with a white female standard of beauty to which black women were presumed unable to reach.

The public sexualization of black women's bodies continues in the commodification of the black female athlete. Athletes such as tennis star Serena Williams continue to have their bodies presented, analyzed, and



criticized—not merely for their performance, but for their sexual desirability. A May 2007 article in *TIME Magazine* focused on Williams’s ability to win the 2007 Australian Open despite appearing “to put it gently, a tad robust.” Although sports writers have a long-standing tradition of emphasizing the physical capabilities and preparation of athletes of both genders, this text is accompanied by a photo of Williams that conforms to broad gender norms of femininity: she appears in a sleeveless dress, with makeup and her hair professionally styled, wearing open-toed shoes revealing toenails painted red. Williams herself also emphasizes her physical assets in the article; she is quoted as stating, “I have a big ass. I have big boobs . . . It’s not common for athletes to have those assets. I’ll never be a size 0.”

Serena Williams plays in the U.S. Open, 2002.



Roger Wong/Photofest

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Williams's comments, whether in response to a question or volunteered to the interviewer, suggests a level of comfort with her body and an acceptance of its appearance, despite her dependence on it for both athletic and economic performance. The excerpt does not indicate whether she recognizes her position in the ongoing cultural commodification of black women's bodies.<sup>1</sup> Sport in the United States is a booming business, and, like many professional black female athletes, Williams likely recognizes that the right combination of strength, skill, and femininity translates into public popularity and material gain. The picture of Williams in the sleeveless dress reveals taut, muscular arms and calves—indicating superior strength—whereas the gentle draping of the knit dress and windblown hair suggests conformity with gendered notions of femininity.

Along with her sister Venus, Serena Williams follows in the footsteps of another athlete who is often credited by current athletes as breaking down the barrier for black female athletes to contend successfully with the jezebel image and white standards of beauty. Florence Griffith Joyner, or "Flo-Jo," as she was affectionately called by the sports public, was an Olympic athlete who won three gold medals in track and field at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. A world record-holding sprinter, Flo-Jo appeared for every race in a competition uniform and shoes that met IAATF standards, but used color, fabric, and the other parts of her body that were not regulated by IAATF standards to express the gendered norms of femininity. In particular, her long, chemically straightened hair and her long, brightly painted fingernails were the subject of many commentaries, even as she went on to dominate the sprint races (where aerodynamics is particularly important) over several years. Flo-Jo's appearances at every race in full makeup, hair, and nails challenged a number of norms about female athletes—in particular about their attractiveness and their sexual orientation—even as she handily beat her closest competitors.

The balance and mix of messages sent through media coverage and marketing—and the interactions of such messages with ongoing cultural narratives regarding women, women athletes, and black women athletes in particular—are part of the causally complex world of popular culture. Griffith Joyner's public presentation of self, combined with her marriage to fellow Olympian Al Joyner, is just one example of this complicated discourse delivering multiple messages. Her actions simultaneously contested the stereotypes of black women as unattractive and unmarriageable and that of female athletes as lesbians. Simply by exercising her individual creative autonomy, however, Griffith Joyner also positioned herself within traditional gender ideology of heterosexual marriage and the family in a way that renders homosexuality invisible and undesirable.

**U.S. sprinter Florence Griffith Joyner runs to a world record, winning the 200-meter semi-final at the Summer Olympics, 1988. Behind Joyner is Merlene Ottey of Jamaica.**



*AP Photo/Eric Risberg*

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Patricia Hill Collins notes that this kind of positioning of an athlete is not entirely up to the athlete or her entourage.<sup>2</sup> In her discussion of the advertising campaigns and broadcasts of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), she notes that male partners of WNBA players are often shown on television cutaways cheering their partners on, often while caring for their child at the same time. Although such television shots of loved ones are a long-standing tradition in sports coverage of both male and female sports, the shots in an African American context communicate powerful messages about black fatherhood and manhood, even as the bulk of the attention is centered on the professional athlete and her performance. These kinds of interventions are replicated in film portrayals of black female athletes, such as *Love and Basketball*. Director Gina Prince-Bythewood closes the 2000 film with just such a scenario of Quincy (Omar Epps) supporting his partner Monica (Sanaa Lathan); she plays for the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks while he bounces their daughter on his knee in the stands. These kinds of cultural representations potentially expand the ways in which both masculinity and femininity are performed in African American culture.

### THE REALITY OF BLACK FEMALE ATHLETES' LIVES

What was far less frequently reported about Flo-Jo was her graduation from the University of California at Los Angeles with a degree in psychology. One important impact of Title IX legislation in 1972 was the expansion of college opportunities for women athletes in general and black women athletes in particular. In 1971, there were 137 black women athletes in Division I of the National College Athletic Association (NCAA); in 2000, there were 22,541. This is a tremendous change in access for black women to college sports and, just as important, to a college education. Black female athletes outpace black female nonathletes in graduation rates (62 to 42 percent)<sup>3</sup> and tend to reflect a sense of satisfaction with their lives, despite ongoing navigation of racialized and gendered norms.<sup>4, 5</sup> These findings represent a significant difference from black male athletes (and male athletes more generally), who graduate at far lower rates from Division I NCAA schools.

Beyond statistics, however, a complicated picture starts to emerge about the reality of black female athletes' lives and the progress yet to be made for African American females' access and progress in sports beyond their athletic careers. From an institutional perspective, black female athletes are reputed to graduate at higher rates than their nonathlete black female and black male athlete counterparts for several reasons. Most often, analyses focus on the kinds of economic opportunities available after the college sports careers end. For example, in professional basket-

ball, although black male athletes who are National Basketball Association (NBA) rookies are guaranteed a minimum salary of \$287,000, black female athletes are guaranteed \$26,500 in minimum salary from the WNBA. Yet other factors play a role as well. Division I NCAA black female athletes navigate an athletic-academic complex that is in place on most campuses in which there is a policy of significant restriction and surveillance of their athletic, academic, and private lives in order to “mentor” them to outstanding athletic performance and on-time college graduation. One analyst has likened the complex to a Foucauldian “panopticon”: “an ensemble of mechanisms brought into play in all the clusters of procedures used by power, including permanent surveillance of a group through generalized procedures”.<sup>6</sup> However, when surveyed, black female athletes tend overall to recognize the restrictions on their autonomy and privacy as a price to be paid for excellence and accept them as a fact of life.

Part of this panopticon’s focus is on steering black female college athletes away from an embrace of the controlling “jezebel” image and toward one of the “black lady,” a woman who embraces a politics of respectability and middle-class professionalism. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, “this image may not appear to be a controlling image, merely a benign one. These are the women who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much . . . Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated black ladies are deemed to be too assertive—that’s why they cannot get men to marry them.” Because of the physicality and assertiveness required on the track or court, black female athletes embrace this controlling image with some consequences. Because black female athletes, in particular track athletes, are often recognized among men for their beautiful bodies and because athletes such as Serena Williams and Flo-Jo embrace this recognition, administrative staff in NCAA athletic departments often engage in tactics to socialize black female athletes away from a body-conscious image associated with the “jezebel” and toward the “black lady” image. It is also critical to note that this kind of socialization can emanate from black women coaches and black female teammates as frequently as it can from coaches and athletic department staff who are members of other demographic groups.

## THE FUTURE OF BLACK FEMALE ATHLETES

Despite the great progress in numbers since Title IX’s implementation in the 1970s, significant challenges remain for black female athletes to overcome in terms of their impact on popular culture. The Don Imus episode reveals one key aspect of the challenge—public visibility of black

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female athletes on their own terms. As potential commodities, black female athletes engage in public presentations of self that may deliberately or unconsciously correspond to the controlling images of either the “jezebel” or “the black lady.” Usually, pursuit of sovereignty of social construction as a goal is approached from the perspective of having more African American women in sports media or other decision-making roles in the athletic-academic complex. Lapchick and others have quite rightly noted the dearth of black female representation in the coaching and college athletic administration ranks. But the complicated dance of institutional practices, stereotypes, and individual identities indicates that more than just the faces need to change in order for the impact of black female athletes on popular culture to change.

Even though more black female athletes than ever are accepting Division I scholarships, they remain only 15.4 percent of all Division I female athletes overall, and they are significantly concentrated in basketball and track. Title IX has a complex impact on the access of black female athletes to elite-level college sports. Despite the progress made in more than thirty years, the sports that colleges and universities have more recently added for women, in order to comply with Title IX, do not contain significant numbers or opportunities for black female athletes: golf, soccer, rowing, and lacrosse. Although broad efforts continue in the race- and gender-based integration of these sports, as well as in tennis, progress is very slow. Another significant pipeline for black women is that of the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), but they do not usually have revenue-generating football programs for the kinds of “revenue-sharing” with women’s sports that comparable predominantly white colleges do. Thus, structurally, black female athletes continue to lack comparable opportunities to pursue sports at an elite level.

Yet black female athletes do have an impact on popular culture, providing positive images of black womanhood that are physically healthy in addition to college-educated. Just as the overwhelming majority of NCAA athletes go on to nonathletic professions, so too do black female athletes at elite college, Olympic, and professional ranks. Several black women athletes, including International Olympic Committee chairwoman and rowing bronze medalist Anita DeFrantz, have continued their education and returned to careers in sports through administration. In 1992 retired elite black women athletes from lacrosse, basketball, and fencing founded the Black Women in Sport Foundation to increase the involvement of black women in all aspects of sports in the United States and around the world through grassroots outreach programs. *Love and Basketball* film director Gina Prince-Bythewood preceded her directorial work with an NCAA Division I track career at UCLA in conjunction with film school. This former black female athlete brought black female athletes’ stories to the big screen. But image

is not everything with this dynamic group of women. Their impact on young black women and American popular culture is tangible in ways that continue to complicate monolithic race and gender frameworks. For the women of the Rutgers basketball team, perhaps these earlier cultural interventions will lead to long-lasting rather than episodic sovereignty of black female athlete social construction.

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## Pavement, Prejudice, and Perseverance: The Integration of African Americans in College Basketball

*Brandon E. Martin and Dennis A. Kramer II*

In a sport dominated by talented African American athletes, it is hard to imagine basketball comprising all-white players, coaches, and officials. This absence of African Americans from professional and college basketball was a recent reality. Forty years ago, segregation and racism were the norm for the dominant American society. A true movement toward integration of the African American culture in college sports was preceded by that of professional basketball sixteen years before. Ralph Emerson wrote, "Without the presence of Negro American style our jokes, our style, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, the shocks, the swift changes of pace, that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored . . . a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the games is to make life swing."<sup>1</sup> Given this assertion by Emerson, African American culture has undoubtedly transcended professional and collegiate basketball.

Basketball was not instilled within the African American culture on the collegiate hardwood courts, but on the pavements of inner-city parks and recreation facilities. Performance on the basketball court has been essential in the development of the African American youth, especially in male athletes. Many base their self-concepts heavily on how well they can perform against other males in the community. David Wolf wrote, "For many young men in the slums the school yard is the only place they can feel true pride in what they do, where they . . . can rise for movement against the drabness of anonymity in their lives. Thus, when a player develops extraordinary 'school yard' moves and shots . . . [They] become his measure as a

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man.”<sup>2</sup> This innate sense of pride has led the African American community to embrace the game of basketball while creating its own style within it.

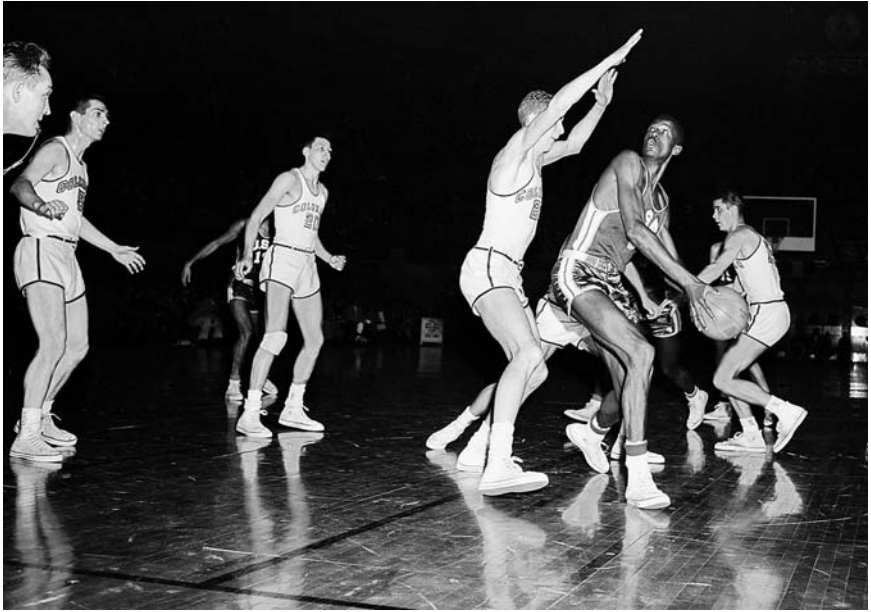
The traditional white basketball is played with reckless abandonment toward the goal of conditioning and mentally exhausting opponents. In contrast to this style of play, elements of speed, mobility, and the ability to create plays within tight spaces have become synonymous with the black style of play that was born on the inner-city streets.<sup>3</sup> The infusion of the black style has not only elevated the level of talent in the game but also made basketball more entertaining. Today, success in the sport is measured by the innovative, athletic, black style of play, unlike the inception of the game, when it was dominated by white players.

For a sport that is regarded as a true American pastime, the creation of basketball came from the vision of a Canadian sports physiologist and Presbyterian minister, James Naismith, in 1891; it consisted of thirteen simple rules. The first collegiate basketball game was played on February 9, 1895: the team from the Minnesota State School of Agriculture played and defeated Hamline College.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the first game, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was created in 1906 in Chicago.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-three years later, the first NCAA championship tournament was played. The University of Oregon defeated Ohio State University. In 1940 the first college basketball games were televised, which increased the popularity of the game and the access to African Americans.<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of African Americans in the basketball culture was and still is a road filled with barriers of exclusion. The development of the game for African Americans was different than for the majority culture. African American pioneers of college basketball faced much opposition; however, persistence allowed their community not only to participate in college basketball but to redefine the game.

### INCLUSION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN COLLEGE BASKETBALL

A decade after the creation of basketball, there was still an absence of participation from the African American community. However, in 1904, a Harvard University graduate, Coach Edwin Henderson, introduced the game to his physical education class at Howard University.<sup>7</sup> More than simply introducing the game, Coach Henderson served as an activist for the inclusion of African Americans in basketball games. Attending a weekly game at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Henderson was met with racist opposition and was asked by the Washington, D.C., YMCA athletic director, C. Edward Beckett, to leave and not return to the premises. The segregation of basketball leagues at local YMCAs provided the first barriers to the inclusion of African Americans in basketball. Determined not to be kept out of the sport that he loved, Henderson decided to create his

Bill Russell, a University of San Francisco center, pivots just before hooking a shot into the basket over the arms of Jim Ranglos of the University of Colorado in a semi-final game of the 1955 national NCAA basketball tournament.



*AP Photo*

own league to accommodate the African American style of play. The Basketball League played its games in the basement of the same building that served as the site of the public debut of Duke Ellington, an iconic African American jazz musician who broke the racial barriers in the popular music culture of his time.

In 1908 the Basketball League became official and featured local high school teams competing against Howard University.<sup>8,9</sup> By the following year, the members of the league entertained large crowds for each of their games. The popularity of the local games created a desire for an official championship. Sports fans in New York City, the second home of African American basketball, heard the news of a possible championship game. The debate over which city hosted the first team was irrelevant—both New York City and Washington, D.C., exercised the greatest influence over the development of basketball in African American communities. In the annual Basketball League Championship, New York club team powerhouses, “Street Smart,” took on the best of D.C. Even though the game was average in terms of entertainment, it opened the doors to continued intercity competition and regional excitement regarding basketball.

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At the same time as the creation of the Basketball League, Edwin Henderson created the first ever all-black basketball league, the Inter-scholastic Athletic Association (ISAA).<sup>10</sup> Henderson was a visionary who dedicated his life to creating a culture that accepted African Americans in basketball and in society. Henderson's involvement in basketball went beyond organizing the ISAA. He also was instrumental in the creation of the Washington, D.C., Public School Athletic League and the Eastern Board of Officials. In addition to introducing the game of basketball to his physical education class, Henderson was also the appointed head of the Department of Physical Education for the segregated Washington, D.C., school system.

Henderson was the author of several texts regarding African American participation in sports, including *The Negro in Sports*, which is the hallmark of his work.<sup>11</sup> For forty years, until the 1950s, Henderson played and coached basketball while introducing hundreds of thousands of Washington area school children to the game. Finally, in 1974, along with Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Bill Russell, and Althea Gibson, he became an inaugural member of the Black Athletes Hall of Fame. Edwin Henderson's dedication to the integration of African Americans in basketball created for youth countless opportunities in future years.

Racial integration in college basketball began around the turn of the century. Because no official records were kept at this time, the earliest African American basketball player in collegiate sports is said to be Samuel Ransom of Beloit College (1904–1908).<sup>12</sup> However, integration within college basketball was met with opposition. On December 24, 1904, an article written by the Indianapolis *Freeman* discussed the \$1,000 penalty that was inflicted on a basketball team in Massachusetts by the president of their New England League for drawing the color line with African Americans.<sup>13</sup>

During World War I, the participation of African Americans in basketball declined. Many young African Americans were sent overseas and fought on the front lines of the war. On their return, many expected a new America, but the exclusion caused by the Jim Crow Laws still existed in American society. After World War I, African American athletes at predominately white institutions were allowed to participate in college football, but not basketball. The racism in college sports became more selective, and the inclusion of African Americans was solely intended to benefit white America. Even all-black universities that had thriving basketball programs felt hardships. Howard University, arguably the lead university for black basketball prior to World War I, suspended their basketball program for a while in 1919 because of a lack of institutional support.<sup>14</sup> Many other universities were forced to postpone play as a result of a lack of adequate facilities and resources to comply with outdoor weather. However, the all-black universities that had the right facilities thrived with the decrease in competition. Institutions such as Hampton University continued to develop a basketball

program, partly because of their access to an indoor facility. These indoor facilities served as the best recruiting tool of the time. Potential black student athletes saw these facilities as an opportunity to compete and practice year-round. The few schools and universities with access to these facilities and programs skyrocketed to prominence in college basketball. For example, Morgan State College in Baltimore never lost a home-court game between 1927 and 1934.<sup>15</sup> The Morgan State team was even victorious against the professional “Harlem Rens” squad of 1929.<sup>16</sup> In that era, this was viewed as the greatest college victory and justified the talent that existed in college basketball. As a result of the success at Morgan State College, other all-black institutions created successful programs. These schools included Alabama State, Lincoln University in Missouri, Morgan State in Maryland, and Wiley College in Texas. However, the most noteworthy school was Xavier University, which won sixty-seven games, losing only two games between 1934 and 1938.<sup>17</sup> Each year the competition between colleges became greater, and the talented all-black teams wanted a forum for organizing intercollegiate games.

By 1928 there were four all-black regional basketball conferences that produced some of the most talented athletes in the nation. However, as predominately black institutions gained prominence within their communities, the same could not be said for the inclusion of blacks in the majority basketball culture. In January 1934 the University of Michigan dismissed Franklin Lett from its freshman basketball squad. When he asked why he was dismissed, Lett was given this explanation by Coach F. C. Cappon, “There has never been a colored boy to play basketball in the Big Ten. It has been a mutual agreement between coaches to not use a colored boy in basketball.”<sup>18</sup> This mutual agreement between Big Ten coaches provided the schools with an opportunity to promote an all-white conference. In an attempt to educate the members of the Big Ten Conference<sup>19</sup> and engender positive change, Roy Wilkins, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP),<sup>20</sup> argued in a letter that the comments of Coach Cappon were not only offensive to Lett but insulted the entire African American community. In fear of being perceived as discriminatory, Michigan officials forced Coach Cappon to allow Lett to play on the freshman team, thus breaking the alleged agreement to keep blacks off the court in the Big Ten. Even though Lett was allowed to participate on the freshman team, he never played varsity basketball for Michigan. The story of Franklin Lett is contrary to that of his schoolmate, Eddie Tolan. Tolan was allowed to participate on the University of Michigan’s track team and subsequently won two gold medals at the first Los Angeles Olympic Games. The dichotomy of the time showed the segmented and sport-specific oppression and exclusion of African American in college basketball. This oppression was a product of the ideology that basketball was a white man’s

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game and that the inclusion of African Americans would diminish the game's credibility.

Compared to the rest of the nation, the western United States showed an increased acceptance of African Americans in college basketball. In the 1930s and 1940s, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) had one of the most prolific scorers in the Pacific Coast Conference Southern Division: Jackie Robinson. Robinson won the title, averaging 12.3 points and 11.1 points per game in his first two years, respectively. Not only did Robinson excel in basketball, he began the tradition of the school's first four-sport letterman in football, track, basketball, and baseball. After his two seasons on the UCLA basketball team, he left to pursue a career in professional baseball. However, the collegiate success of Jackie Robinson on the basketball court was only one of a few success stories in the era from 1920 until 1947 in which few African Americans were allowed to participate in major college basketball programs.

Unlike the aftermath of World War I, at the end of World War II access to public facilities and the lack of equipment requirements quickly made basketball the activity of choice for the African American communities, in both the North and the South. Major college programs began to see the talents that members of the African American community brought to the game and started to recruit players from these communities. Indiana, a state known for racial and ethnic division, served as the arena for a civil rights breakthrough in college basketball. In the 1940s Indiana was home to the largest black YMCA in the nation. Bloomington, Indiana was a town of fans who were passionate about basketball and who paved the way for a young teenager, William Garrett, to serve as a civil rights activist in his attempt to integrate the culture of Division I college basketball.

In 1947, the same year that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball, Indiana's "Mr. Basketball,"<sup>21</sup> William Garrett, became the first African American to play in varsity Big Ten basketball games, putting an end to the same gentlemen's agreement that had kept Franklin Lett from playing at Michigan. More than simply participating in Indiana basketball, Garrett became one of the all-time greats for his school, earning All-American recognition in 1951; he was the third African American ever drafted into the National Basketball Association (NBA). Without question, Garrett's participation was not welcomed with open arms. He received taunts and racial epithets from fellow competitors, both at home and on the road. However, for all that he endured, Garrett opened many doors of opportunity for African American participation in college basketball. Within one year after his graduation from Indiana University, six African Americans were on the basketball team at the Big Ten conference.

After the entrance of African American student athletes into elite college basketball, other universities followed the trend of integration set by

Indiana University. Soon after William Garrett dominated the Big Ten Conference, the West produced one of the greatest college basketball players ever to play the game: William “Bill” Russell. Russell led the University of San Francisco (USF) to two consecutive NCAA National Championships in 1955 and 1956. Russell earned All-American accolades both years and was the national Player of the Year in 1956. More important, Bill Russell was such a dominant force in college basketball that his talent changed many of the existing rules. During his tenure at USF, the three-second lane was doubled in size, in order to curtail Russell’s ability to control the game defensively. Bill Russell served as a role model for the African American community in how he endured extreme prejudice, played the game with a team mentality, and succeeded in a sport that was presumed to be dominated by white male players. Bill Russell’s athletic accomplishments continued the foundation set by William Garrett and provided increased access to the game of college basketball for African Americans nationwide.

Thirteen years after Garrett played at Indiana University and nine years after Bill Russell’s dominance, Loyola University in Chicago, Illinois, ushered in a new era of desegregation in college basketball. In 1961 Loyola University became the first university to play four African American players at one time on the court. This action broke an agreement between college basketball coaches—not to play more than three African American players at one time. Coach George Ireland of the Loyola University basketball team, broke this agreement during every game of the season by playing at least four African American players. In 1963 Loyola continued to change the face of college basketball by starting four African American student athletes in the NCAA Championship games. That 1963 team defeated the heavily favored team from the University of Cincinnati for the national title. This game was the first national championship that had majority African American starters, four from Loyola and three from Cincinnati.

The entrance of William Garrett to Big Ten basketball and the persistence to integrate the game of college basketball by Loyola University set the stage for the culmination of the racial equity debate in college basketball. The 1966 NCAA Championship showcased the University of Kentucky against the team from Texas Western. The game always featured two distinct coaches, Adolph Rupp and Don Haskins. Kentucky head coach Adolph Rupp, the winningest coach of this era, had consistently failed to recruit or ever play an African American player. In contrast to Rupp, Texas Western’s head coach Don Haskins built his team’s foundation on starting four African American players during the entire season and starting five African Americans in the championship game. This game was not the first time that African American student athletes had participated in the NCAA tournament, nor was it the first time that Texas Western had integrated its own team. Even though Texas Western University was the first team in the

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Southeastern Conference (1955) to recruit and play African Americans, this game served as the first time that a team had started five African American players in a NCAA Division I championship game.

Adding to the historical significance of the game was that Adolph Rupp supported racial segregation in college basketball. The story of the Texas Western team upsetting the favorite Kentucky team while using only African American players in the game is well known. It wasn't until after winning the championship that the members of that 1966 Texas Western team felt the impact of its accomplishments: soon after the championship, the Texas Western Team received more than 40,000 death threats and hate mail from fans who did not want complete integration of the sport. Despite opposition from individuals who were against integration, the Texas Western team served as the catalyst for changing the face of college basketball. Soon after the 1966 championship game, basketball programs at schools in the South began to open their doors to African American student athletes. More athletic scholarships were awarded to African Americans, and their increased participation in college basketball began to reshape the way that the game was played. The game between the University of Kentucky and Texas Western University was not the single event that changed the racial dynamic of college sport, but it served as the vehicle to start a complete restructuring of college basketball. College basketball began to shift from a sport that was solely for the white culture into a multicultural game.

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND COLLEGE BASKETBALL**

The game of basketball was first introduced to women in 1892 at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts.<sup>22</sup> Basketball served as a way for collegiate women to experience physical education and provided some time away from their studies. On April 4, 1896, the first official intercollegiate women's basketball game took place. The game between Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley, was played with extremely modified rules compared to the men's games and featured a score of 2 to 1, with Stanford University winning. The beginning of women's basketball was dominated by white women, partly because of the absence of access to higher education for African American women. However, once the game was introduced to African American women, they began to excel at both at the professional and the collegiate level.

Around the start of the 1920s, even before African American women were allowed to vote, two black female basketball teams were created that showcased two of the most skilled athletes of this era.<sup>23</sup> The Chicago Romas, created by Edward Butler, dominated competitors in the Midwest and Chicago areas. The Romas were led by their captain, Isadore Channel, who was also a four-time American Tennis Association (ATA) champion



and became one of the most prolific female African American basketball players. The second dominant African American women's team of this time was the Philadelphia Tribune team, which was sponsored by the *Philadelphia Tribune* newspaper. The Tribune team started play in 1931 and was led by another ATA eight-time champion, Ora Washington. Washington led her squad on a dominant tour of the Philadelphia area and seldom lost a contest. Washington later went on to play for the Germantown Hornets, another team in the Philadelphia area.

At the same time as both of these professional team competed, many programs among the elite black institutions were moving to eliminate their basketball programs for women. Institutions such as Howard University, which fielded an impressive African American men's basketball team, felt that the participation of women in sports went against the middle-class feminine ideal of that era. This ideology led to the reallocation of resources from women's basketball to more socially acceptable women's sports—such as badminton, archery, and table tennis.

Philander Smith College, in Little Rock, Arkansas, had the first dominant African American women's college team. In 1918 the team was declared the state champion after defeating all of the local competition. This declaration led to an announcement by the Georgia-South Carolina Athletic Association, which represented seven schools in the two states, in 1926: the formation of a conference championship signified the forthcoming increase of African American women in college basketball and their place in higher education.

At many colleges, the inclusion of basketball for African American women was directly correlated to the increase in student enrollment. At Bennett College, enrollment went from 10 women in 1926 to 138 women by 1930. During that same time, institutional resources were given to the development of a physical education program that included the opportunity for female students to participate in basketball. Bennett College quickly became the home for African American women's basketball, both college and professional. In 1935 Bennett College had a series against the team from the *Philadelphia Tribune*, which featured superstar Ora Washington. The series between Bennett and *Tribune* was a historical event—the emergence of skilled African American women's basketball players and the refining of the idea of femininity during this period.<sup>24</sup>

Over the next forty years, the prominence of women's collegiate basketball continued to rise. In direct response to the lack of gender equality in college sports, Congress enacted Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972. Title IX outlined: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."<sup>25</sup> College sports served to be the most public

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application for Title IX, ensuring an equal distribution of athletic scholars and the progressive inclusion of women's sport in each institution.

Prior to Title IX, Charlene Vivian Stringer was making her mark as one of the most successful African American female college coaches of that era. Stringer started her career in the early 1970s at Cheyney State University, which happened to be the same university where African American male coaching legend John Chaney began his career. In 1982 the NCAA announced that it was going to host the first Women's National Championship Tournament. Stringer led her small, all-black institution to the championship game. In spite of her loss to Louisiana State University (LSU), Stringer proved the ability of a small, all-black college to compete with large powerhouse programs. Cheyney's run to the national title game also increased the opportunities for future participation of African American women in college basketball.

After reaching the finals at Cheyney State, Stringer moved on to Iowa University, where she again built a program and led her team to the Final Four during her tenure. In 2006, at Rutgers University, Stringer became the first college basketball coach, male or female, to lead three different programs to a Final Four. Even though she has not won a national title, Stringer has a number of accolades, including being named one of the 101 most influence minorities in sports by *Sports Illustrated* in 2003. Stringer's reputation for being a pioneer and catalyst for change in college sports is legendary.

After the implementation of Title IX, many female college basketball programs rose to prominence. However, no other team dominated women's basketball more than teams at the University of Southern California (USC) in the 1980s. The first true dynasty of NCAA women's basketball was the 1980s USC teams led by All-Americans Cheryl Miller and Cynthia Cooper. Their individual dominance led to back-to-back national championships in 1983 and 1984. Miller became the school's leader in nearly every single category for women. She was also named the best basketball player—male or female—by *Sports Illustrated* in 1986. Along with holding many of the USC's records for women's basketball, Miller was also the first Trojan ever to have a jersey retired.

In 1996 Chamique Holdsclaw and Tamika Catchings led their Tennessee Volunteers to an unprecedented three straight national championships. Holdsclaw graduated in 1999 as the NCAA women's leader in scoring and rebounding. Under the guidance of Coach Pat Summit, the University of Tennessee's women's basketball program became the example by which all other women's basketball programs are measured. The success of the teams at the University of Tennessee in the late 1990s built an excitement around women's basketball that led to the creation of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in 1996.

The success of early African American female coaches and the implementation of Title IX created numerous opportunities for the participation of African American women in college basketball. Today, African American women represent almost 13 percent of college basketball head coaches and more than 30 percent of assistant basketball coaches. With the creation of the WNBA, African American women have a similar opportunity as male players to foster their basketball talents in college and to play professionally after graduation. The successes of influential African American female coaches and the participation of standout female basketball players has continued to create a culture in which African American women are more respected in college and professional sports.

### **LEGENDARY COACHES IN COLLEGE BASKETBALL**

After many of the racial barriers were eradicated, African American participation in college basketball steadily increased. College sports began to embrace the athletic talents that this population brought to the game, and the public's interest continued to develop. Soon after the 1966 Texas Western championships, African Americans on college basketball teams started to outnumber their white counterparts. Not only did African Americans begin to outnumber their peers, they also continued to dominate a game that most of them had learned on the playgrounds. Even though the first African American college basketball player to play in a major conference was Bill Garrett in 1947, it was not until twenty years later that African American coaches were infused into college basketball.

Even before African American athletes were completely integrated into college basketball, there was a presence of African American coaches at historically all-black institutions. None of these coaches was more notorious than John B. McClendon. Known for his notorious dedication to conditioning, he coached at North Carolina College and Tennessee State University. He is credited with the invention of the half-court press, the four-corners offense, and, more important, the fast break. In the 1940s, McClendon organized a secret game with Duke University in which McClendon's team effectively beat the Blue Devils by using a combination of creative schemes and well-conditioned athletes. The success of McClendon as a coach created the idea in the African American community that there were opportunities for them in coaching college basketball.

Clarence "Big House" Gaines was another prominent coach, partly because of his intimidating stature and career-long tenure. Building on the foundation of team speed, founded by John McClendon, Gaines coached for an unprecedented forty-seven years, from 1946 to 1993, at Winston-Salem State University. Gaines captured a career mark of 828 wins, placing

Georgetown's John Thompson raises his hands in triumph after his Hoyas defeated the Wildcats of Kentucky 53-40 to advance to the NCAA finals against the Houston Cougars in 1985.



*AP Photo*

him second on the all-time list behind Adolph Rupp's record of 876. Gaines and his up-tempo team became the first predominately black school to win an NCAA basketball title—by winning the Division II Championship in 1967. Gaines's individual accolades range from twelve Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) championships, five CIAA Conference Basketball Coach of the Year awards, seven enshrinements in various Halls of Fame, and a winning percentage (65 percent) during this tenure. Gaines debunked the myth that African American coaches were not naturally equipped to develop affective basketball strategies. More important than all of his personal successes, Clarence Gaines created opportunities for future African American college coaches.

In addition to the successes of McClendon and Gaines, John T. Thompson left an indelible mark on college basketball. In 1972 Thompson took the head coaching job at Georgetown University. Prior to his coaching career, Thompson was an All-American at Providence College in 1964 in Washington, D.C. After graduating from Providence, Thompson entered the NBA to play two seasons for the Boston Celtics and played behind the legendary Bill Russell. He received two championship rings while with the Boston Celtics, and, after two years in the NBA, Thompson retired in order to coach high school basketball. In both his playing and coaching careers, Thompson was an imposing physical specimen, who towered over many of his opponents and played with a passion that led his teams to excel on the national stage.

Over his twenty-seven years of coaching at Georgetown, Thompson won a total of 596 games, including twenty-four consecutive years of postseason play. Thompson's Hoyas saw three Final Fours (1982, 1984, and 1985), winning the NCAA Championship in 1984. Thompson, known for his passionate approach toward the development of his team, abruptly announced his resignation from Georgetown on January 8, 1999. Many credit Thompson for creating a culture that accepted a strong black head coach in college basketball. Thompson's dedication to educating African American basketball players and creating a culture that fostered development allowed his teams to succeed at both the collegiate and professional levels.

Building on the presence of John Thompson in college basketball, John Chaney was known for his demand for excellence, his pride in being a black coach, and his ability to win basketball games. Chaney spent the majority of his later coaching career at Temple University, turning the basketball program there into a national powerhouse. However, it was Chaney's first college basketball coaching position that provided him with his only national championship. Chaney spent ten years at Division II Cheyney State University, where he won an impressive 80 percent of basketball games. After his tenure, Chaney moved to Philadelphia to coach at Temple University. Chaney's accolades include eighteen NCAA Tournament appearances,

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eight Atlantic 10 Conference championships, and multiple Coaches of the Year awards. Aside from his athletic dominance, Chaney will be remembered most for the message that he sent in 2005 to Temple's cross town rivals, St. Joseph's University: Chaney sent in a seldom-used player, Nehemiah Gordon, with the sole mission of committing five hard fouls in the next four minutes. In the process of committing the fouls, Gordon slammed John Bryant to the floor; Bryant broke his arm and was suspended for rest of the season. Even though Chaney was the first African American coach to win 700 games, this poor decision somewhat tarnished his image and reputation in the game. Notwithstanding this impact on his career, Chaney's success ushered in a new wave of African American coaches in college basketball.

Today, 62.6 percent of all college basketball athletes are African American.<sup>26</sup> However, there is a disparity between those playing basketball and those teaching the game. In 2005 African American male head coaches made up one-fourth of college basketball coaches.<sup>27</sup> Currently, a majority of African Coaches in college are in assistant coach positions—more than 35 percent in college basketball, making a total of 17.6 percent of all male assistant coaches in college athletics. Since 1999, there have been significant increases in the acceptance of African American coaches.<sup>28</sup> In that same year, African American head coaches only amounted to 6 percent of all head coaches in college sports. In 2005 the number of African American head coaches increased slightly, to 7.3 percent. However, college basketball is still progressive in the increase of African American coaches. In 1999 African American college basketball coaches only amounted to 17.4 percent of coaches, but in 2005 that number rose to 25.4 percent of all head college basketball coaches.<sup>29</sup> The progression of African American head coaches continues to create an environment of inclusion within college basketball. However, there is still a large disparity between the number of African Americans who participate in college basketball and those who are actually coaching the sport.

### ACADEMIC LEGISLATION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT ATHLETES

With the influx of African Americans in college athletics programs, the popularity of revenue-generating sports rose. As soon as the racial divide was narrowed in college athletics, the popularity of college revenue-generating sports, football and basketball, drastically increased. Universities started to place a higher premium on producing successful athletic teams in order to generate revenue and increase alumni participation. The pressure to produce winning programs led student athletes and athletic programs to divert from their academic roles. Researchers such as

Edwards (1984) went as far as to claim that the game then and today was the “new plantation system,” in which African American student athletes were being used to produce revenues for their respective universities while receiving no educational skills in return.<sup>30</sup> Edwards also claimed that the universities were funneling student athletes into majors that required the least amount of work, in order to keep them eligible for participation in their sports. Therefore, in an effort to reclaim the academic integrity of college sports, an ad-hoc committee of the American Council on Education was commissioned in 1983.

By the end of 1983, the ad-hoc committee had developed Proposition 48 as a means to help prioritize academics within college athletics. Essentially, Proposition 48 called for a requirement of standard academic scores, with an emphasis on grade-point average (GPA) and SAT scores. The committee determined that a cumulative GPA of 2.0 and a combined SAT score of at least 700 provided an accurate predictor of the abilities of incoming freshman student athletes to graduate. In the same year in which Proposition 48 was developed, it was presented to the NCAA and passed. However, it was not until 1986 that it was entirely integrated into the academic structure of college sports. Additionally, in an effort to strengthen Proposition 48, the NCAA enacted Proposition 42 in 1989. Proposition 42 augmented Proposition 48 and effectively denied athletes financial aid during their first year if they did not meet the initial specified eligibility requirements. The weight of Proposition 48 within athletic regulations was increased with the inclusion of the provisions in Proposition 42. Under the umbrella of Proposition 48, Proposition 42 had a disproportionate affect on the academic potential of African American student athletes.

Since its implementation and restructuring, Proposition 48 has been surrounded by controversy and embraced with sharp criticism. Much of the debate centered on the use of SAT scores, which have traditionally been a barrier for African American entrance into higher education. The inclusion of SAT scores in Proposition 48 made it more difficult for minority student athletes to qualify under the academic standards and to gain admission and athletic financial aid during their first year. A contingent of African American educators, led by Grambling State University President Joseph B. Johnson, strongly opposed the implementation of Proposition 48—in fear that it would have a negative impact on African American student athlete enrollment. Studies abound confirming the fear expressed by Johnson and his academic colleagues. In 1989 Educational Testing Service (ETS) President Gregory Anrig stated that the eligibility scores “are not based on any validity study and are apparently simply an arbitrary choice that has yet to be explained to any.”<sup>31</sup> That same year, in a study of 424 potential student athletes who were deemed ineligible through Proposition 48, 299 were African American, thus giving support to the claims

about the decrease in African American enrollment. Both of these examples illustrate that opposition to Proposition 48 came not only from the college athletic administrators and students but also from those administering standardized tests.

Opposition to the inclusion of Proposition 42 existed as well, most notably by Georgetown University head basketball coach John Thompson. The protest of Thompson and other African American coaches led to a change in the NCAA policy. The new policy stated that student athletes who met either the GPA or SAT scores would be given financial assistance during their freshman year. However, student athletes who still did not meet either of the eligibility requirements were not given aid during their freshman year. Still, the African American student-athlete prospects felt the majority of the challenges associated with the implementation of Proposition 48. In trying to explain how standardized tests, as cutoff scores, have an impact on low-income student athletes, sports ethicist Russ Gough stated, "There is a strong correlation between family income and standardized test score . . . the NCAA might as well throw out its standardized test score requirements and simply allow a freshman to play or not play on the basis on his family income."<sup>32</sup> This correlation led to the widening of the gap in access to institutions of higher education. The correlation between income and test scores was presented to the NCAA at the time that Proposition 42 was voted on. However, this information was ignored and the legislation was passed.

The implementation of Proposition 42 led to academic improvements in the African American population of student athletes. However, in 1995, the NCAA passed Proposition 16, which redefined the eligibility standards for participation in college sports so that potential student athletes must have a 2.0 GPA, in thirteen core classes, and an SAT score of 1010. Student athletes with lower test scores needed a higher GPA in order to be eligible for admission. For example, a student athlete with a GPA of 2.5 needs an SAT score of 810. Additionally, unlike Propositions 48 and 42, Proposition 16 also applied not only to Division I schools but also to student athletes at the 254 Division II institutions. The increase in the eligibility standards led to an unprecedented increase in the number of ineligible African American student athletes, nine to ten times more than their white peers.<sup>33</sup>

The combined effect of the NCAA academic standards legislations has created challenges for increasing the inclusion of African Americans in college sports, specifically college basketball. The gains that were made in the social acceptance of race in college basketball are not tainted by the legislative exclusion of this same population. If Proposition 48 had been implemented a year earlier, it would have effectively eliminated 47 percent of African American student athletes who, because these propositions were not in place, went on to graduate.<sup>34</sup> This shows that the academic standards



set by the NCAA are not accurate predictors of academic success or persistence toward graduation.

Nationally, colleges and universities continue to find inconsistencies with standardized tests; many of them are moving away from including them in their admission process. The biases that exist created a false sense of academic promise and inevitably created barriers and challenges for African American student athletes. A majority of African American students rely on collegiate athletic scholarship to subsidize the cost of their college education. The growing problem of student athletes forgoing college and going straight to the professional leagues is a direct result of the eligibility restrictions that are placed on college participation. Currently, this phenomenon has been compounded even more by the 2005 age-restriction policy for the NBA, which states that, in order to be eligible for participation in professional sports, a student athlete must participate in one year of college basketball or be one year removed from high school. African American student athletes face extreme pressure to qualify under the NCAA eligibility restrictions—not only to be able to play college basketball but also to avoid jeopardizing their chances of playing professionally.

## **FUTURE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN COLLEGIATE BASKETBALL**

For many African American student athletes, college basketball has been a platform to enhance societal and economical status. Spencer Haywood, considered by many as the “godfather” of the hardship rule, began the trend of leaving college to pursue professional basketball. A Supreme Court decision in the 1970s opened the door for Haywood to declare hardship and enter the American Basketball Association (ABA) draft. Before Haywood left the University of Detroit, his mother was living on thirty dollars a week and his siblings were picking cotton in the Mississippi Delta. In an effort to assist his family financially, Haywood declared hardship and signed a six-year \$1.9 million dollar deal with the Seattle Supersonics. After Haywood made the jump to the ABA, Moses Malone, Daryl Dawkins, and Bill Willoughby made themselves eligible for the NBA and ABA draft out of high school.

Twenty years later, the proliferation of African American male high school basketball players advancing to the NBA had an immense impact on college basketball. The elite, ultratalented high school players became absent in college basketball, particularly in traditional powerhouse programs such as North Carolina, Michigan, and Georgetown. Beginning in 1995, high school senior Kevin Garnett was the fifth pick overall by the Minnesota Timberwolves in the NBA draft.<sup>35</sup> The following year, Kobe Bryant and Jermaine O’Neal joined the short list of high school basketball players making the jump to the NBA, followed by eleven other players in

the next eight years. Today's talented players witnessed the success of these athletes to improve their status in society. However, the success of these high school athletes was short lived; the NBA, in 2005, instituted a new age-restriction policy that specified nineteen as the minimum age for participation in the NBA. Additionally, players must have their nineteenth or later birthday in the calendar year of the draft in order to be eligible, and all U.S. players must be at least one year removed from high school. This rule essentially ended the practice of high school basketball athletes entering the NBA without enrolling in at least one year of college.

Supporters of the NBA's age-restriction policy contend that it was not designed to preclude athletic opportunities for talented African American players, but rather to serve as a safety net for unsuccessful athletes, such as Ellis Richardson, Taj McDavid, and Lenny Cooke. These high school athletes went undrafted after they declared for the NBA draft. Unfortunately, their college eligibility was costing them their college basketball eligibility and ending their dreams of playing in the NBA. Additionally, the message being sent to youth continues to perpetuate the stigma that, for talented African Americans, professional athletics is the best way out of the ghetto or a life of destitution. When asked about the reasons for imposing the age restriction, NBA Commissioner David Stern was quoted as saying: "We would like kids bouncing the ball in the sixth grade now whose parents tell me that they are planning to go directly to the NBA out of high school to know they are not."<sup>36</sup> By instituting the age-restriction policy, the NBA has created a culture in which college attendance is mandatory. High school basketball players must experience college life and take advantage of a year to develop academically, athletically, and socially. Unfortunately, a large majority of student athletes will not attend a college or university: many will choose instead the option of playing internationally or participating in the National Basketball Development Leagues (NBDL). Notwithstanding professional opportunities, this trend will not only have an impact on the number of African American basketball players who earn college diplomas, but, more important, it will influence a population in America that is considered endangered.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in David W. Stowe, "Uncolored People," *Lingua Franca* 6 (September–October 1996): 71.

2. Jeff Greenfield, "The Black and White Truth about Basketball," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin, and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. G. D. Caponi (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 375.

3. *Ibid.*, 376.

4. Wikipedia, "College Basketball: History," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/College\\_basketball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/College_basketball).

5. The NCAA was originally named the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (IAAUS). The IAAUS was founded by sixty-two member institutions on December 28, 1905, and was constituted on March 31, 1906. IAAUS officially changed its name to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910.

6. Wikipedia, "College Basketball: History."

7. Arthur R. Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory* (New York: Amistad, 1988), 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

9. Howard University is a historically black university in Washington, D.C. It was founded in 1867 by a congressional order and is the number-one producer of African American Ph.D.s in the nation.

10. Wikipedia, "Edwin Henderson," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin\\_Henderson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Henderson).

11. Edwin Bancroft Henderson, *Negro in Sports* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1939).

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 15.

15. *Ibid.*, 16.

16. The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the Rens, refers, in this context, to an all-black professional basketball team that was founded in 1922. In 1939 it was also the first all-black basketball team to win a championship.

17. Henderson, *Negro in Sports*, 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 19.

19. At this time, the Big Ten Conference consisted of the following universities: University of Chicago, University of Michigan, Ohio State University, University of Illinois, Indiana University, University of Iowa, University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Purdue University, and University of Wisconsin. Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big\\_Ten\\_Conference](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Ten_Conference).

20. The NAACP, originally called the National Negro Committee, was founded February 12, 1909, in New York City. Founders of the NAACP include Ida Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. Du Bois, Henry Moscowitz, Mary White Ovington, Oswald Garrison Villiard, and William English Walling. NAACP <http://www.naacp.org/home/index.htm>.

21. The Mr. Basketball award is given to the best high school basketball player in a particular state.

22. Henderson, *Negro in Sports*, 8.

23. *Ibid.*, 8.

24. Reba Liberti, "'We Were Ladies, We Just Played Basketball Like Boys': African American Womanhood and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928–1942," *Journal of Sport History* 26 (1999): 574.

25. 20 U.S.C. § 1681.

26. Anonymous, "Black Teams, White Coaches: Racial Equality in Coaching of College Sports," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 54 (2006): 36.

27. *Ibid.*, 37.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

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30. Henry Edwards, "The Black 'Dumb Jock' an American Sports Tragedy," *College Board Review* 131 (1984): 11.

31. Fair Test, "What's Wrong with the NCAA's Test Score Requirements," The National Center for Fair & Open Testing.

32. Russ Gough, "A Sporting Chance," *Washington Post*, November 29, 1995, Education Section.

33. Fair Test, "What's Wrong."

34. Ibid.

35. In actuality, the first two high school basketball players to be drafted by a professional team were Darryl Dawkins and Moses Malone, in 1974. Dawkins went the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers, and the ABA's Utah Stars hired Malone.

36. Bob Smizik, "NBA Age Limit Is So Much to Stern," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 9, 2005, Sports Section.

# A Dream Deferred: African Americans in Baseball

*Robert Nowatzki*

Baseball has long been seen as a symbol of America, and in some ways the relationship of African Americans to baseball reflects their relationship to America. In this respect, the exclusion of African Americans from major league baseball between 1887 and 1947 parallels—and predates—the legalization of racial segregation in the Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ruled such segregation unconstitutional in public schools. Jackie Robinson’s major league debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers on opening day, 1947 was nearly as important as the *Brown* ruling seven years later in symbolizing the end of Jim Crow segregation. Yet, in baseball, as in education and the rest of American society, the beginning of racial integration did not entail the end of prejudice and racial inequality; today, baseball still faces many challenges in diversifying its team owners, general managers, and umpires and in attracting African Americans as fans and players.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF BLACK BASEBALL

Unfortunately, the statistical achievements of black baseball players have not been as duly documented as those of their white counterparts, but baseball historians have unearthed a wealth of historical information about black baseball, even in its earliest years. Such historical work reveals that African Americans began participating in baseball before the Civil War. The first recorded game between African American teams took place in Brooklyn on September 28, 1860, when the Weeksville of New York defeated the Colored Union Club 11–0. During the ensuing decade, as baseball was becoming organized, several African American teams formed in the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states. One of these teams featured Charles R. Douglass, son of the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

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Until 1867, no official policy in baseball excluded African American players or teams, but in that year the National Association of Base Ball Players passed a resolution that barred “any club which may be composed of one or more colored players.” This resulted in the expulsion of Octavius Catto’s team, the Black Champion Pythians, and the dissolution of other black teams.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this racial ban, several African Americans emerged on black semiprofessional and minor league teams during the 1870s and 1880s, including infielder John “Bud” Fowler, second baseman Ulysses S. (Frank) Grant, pitchers George Washington Stovey and Robert Higgins, and catcher Moses Fleetwood Walker, who was the last black player in the major leagues before 1947. All of them received positive coverage in white sports papers but were not treated as kindly by white opponents or even teammates. Of these players, none was more famous than Walker, who played for Oberlin College and the University of Michigan and later caught for the Toledo Blue Stockings, a team that was promoted to major league status when it joined the American Association in 1884. He also played with professional clubs in Cleveland, Newark, Waterbury (Connecticut), and Syracuse between 1884 and 1889. As David Zang points out, Walker was well known for his catching skills and enjoyed celebrity status in spite of—and because of—his racial identity. However, like other black players of his day, he was forced out of baseball by a network of bigoted white players, managers, and owners led by Chicago White Stockings player and manager Adrian “Cap” Anson.<sup>2</sup> To many white players and fans, black and white players on the same team suggested an undesirable social equality. Many white fans also expressed their opposition to African Americans playing with or against white players. For instance, Richmond fans who objected to Walker’s presence on the diamond sent the following letter to his manager:

We the undersigned do hereby warn you not to put up Walker, the Negro catcher, the evenings that you play in Richmond, as we could mention the names of 75 determined men who have sworn to mob Walker if he comes on the ground in a suit. We hope you will listen to our words of warning, so there will be no trouble; but if you do not there certainly will be.<sup>3</sup>

Although not all white Americans were as virulent in their racism as the authors of this threat, racism permeated depictions of black ballplayers in such mainstream periodicals as *Harper’s Weekly*.<sup>4</sup>

It is no coincidence that as baseball became America’s national pastime, it also became more aggressively lily-white. Part of this connection between nationalism and racism in baseball has to do with the sport’s mythical qualities. As Gerald Early notes, baseball is “a ‘pastoral’ sport of innocence and

triumphalism in the American mind, a sport of epic romanticism, a sport whose golden age is always associated with childhood.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, these mythical qualities that white Americans gave baseball have also been associated with whiteness in the West for centuries. This whiteness can literally be seen on baseball diamonds—the home plate, the bases, the pitching rubber, the foul lines, the batter’s box, and the ball are white. On a symbolic level, when the 1919 Chicago White Sox were dubbed the “Black Sox” after “throwing” the World Series, their nickname implied the innocence of whiteness and the wickedness of blackness, even though all the guilty players were of European descent. The association of whiteness with virtue was part of the racist ideology of late nineteenth-century America, and it should come as no surprise that a game associated with America and innocence became the exclusive domain of white men.

The prejudice driving this racial exclusion came from opponents, fans, and teammates, and black players in the International League were often the targets of white opponents who threw at their heads and slid into their legs with raised spikes. Even more devastating was the banning of African American players from this league in 1887, although this ban did not stop John McGraw, manager of the Baltimore Orioles, from acquiring the light-complected black player Charlie Grant in 1903 and unsuccessfully passing him off as a Native American named “Tokahoma.” Even before this ban, African American players who were excluded from white teams began to form their own teams. The first African American professional team, the Cuban Giants, was formed in 1885. The team’s name, and the players’ poor (but apparently effective) attempts to pass as Hispanic, were aimed at white fans who would have objected to watching an African American team.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE NEGRO LEAGUES**

Because black teams and individual black players were excluded from the major leagues, one solution was to form a league of black teams. The short-lived National Colored Base Ball League, also called the League of Colored Baseball Clubs, was formed in 1887 with Walter S. Brown, an African American newspaperman, as its president. Although the league did not finish its first season, African American teams continued to emerge, mostly in the North. In 1910, two more leagues that would include black players or teams appeared briefly: Beauregard Moseley’s National Negro Baseball League and the United States League of Professional Ball Clubs.<sup>7</sup> The concept of a black league supported by African American fans fit into Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on social and economic separatism and racial uplift, and his philosophy of building separate black institutions rather than pushing for integration survived his death in 1915. Though the Negro Leagues were born of racist exclusion, many African Americans took

pride in their favorite black players and teams and supported an institution that often put dollars in the pockets of black owners rather than white men. One of the earliest black team owners was Frank C. Leland, who formed the amateur Union Base Ball Club in 1888—later known as the Chicago Unions—which became a professional team in 1896.<sup>8</sup>

Eventually, however, Leland's status as the premier black owner in black-ball would be eclipsed by Andrew "Rube" Foster, formerly a pitcher and manager for Leland's Giants as well as the Cuban X-Giants and other black teams. After a falling-out with Leland, Foster successfully sued for the rights to the name of Leland's team in 1910, renamed the team the Chicago American Giants, and was on his way to becoming one of black baseball's most powerful and famous owners. His ambitions reached even higher, however; as early as 1910 he began thinking about forming an all-black league. He would eventually realize his dream when ten years later he formed the Negro National League. He thought the league should help prepare black players for integration into the major leagues and sought to give the league a sense of legitimacy through regular schedules, binding player contracts, and salaries so that players would be more likely to be signed by major league teams. He also sought to benefit African American communities financially and rid black baseball of white ownership, though whites continued to own black teams after his rise to power. Foster proved to be a controversial leader in the league, and other owners criticized him for making decisions that favored his American Giants, including scheduling home games for his team on weekends so as to bring in more fans and revenue.<sup>9</sup>

Foster's Negro National League was not the only black league to form during the 1920s. In the spring of 1920, the Negro Southern League also formed, including teams from Birmingham, Montgomery, Chattanooga, Nashville, Jacksonville, New Orleans, and Atlanta. After this league split over a conflict, another league was formed in the southeast that included teams from Macon, Brunswick, Greenville, and Savannah. This league was later revived in 1932, when no other black leagues existed.<sup>10</sup> Another league, the Eastern Colored League, was founded by Ed Bolden, owner of the Hilldale Daisies in the Philadelphia area. The Daisies were joined by the Brooklyn Royal Giants, New York Lincoln Giants, Bacharach Giants, Baltimore Black Sox, and Eastern Cuban Stars. The existence of the ECL alongside the NNL made it possible to stage a Negro League World Series, which first took place between the Daisies and the Kansas City Monarchs in 1924. It was played in Chicago and Baltimore as well as the hometowns of the two teams and attracted nearly 46,000 people. African American newspapers sent reporters to cover the event, but white newspapers did not acknowledge it.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the wishes of Rube Foster, several early black teams had white owners, such as the Cuban Giants' Walter Cook and John Bright, the



Cuban X-Giants' E. B. Lamar, and the Philadelphia Giants' Walter Schlichter. Although the 1930s and 1940s saw more African American owners of Negro League and independent black teams, white owners, promoters, and booking agents played important and sometimes problematic roles in black baseball. Aside from Kansas City Monarchs owner J. L. Wilkinson, most white owners were regarded with suspicion by black players and fans as well as black owners. Another group of white men who were often not trusted by African Americans was white booking agents.<sup>12</sup> Several black owners were wary of the control exercised by these men and called for racial solidarity in preventing white booking agents from taking over the game. This problem made it more important to support organized leagues of black teams with black owners.

Unfortunately, the difficulties facing the Negro Leagues went beyond exploitative white booking agents. By the mid-1920s, the NNL was losing money and saw several of its teams fold. It also lost its leadership in 1925 when Foster was nearly asphyxiated by a gas leak in an Indianapolis hotel and was later committed to a psychiatric asylum.<sup>13</sup> In 1932, Foster's Negro National League was disbanded. Black baseball had suffered an earlier setback in 1928 with the collapse of the Eastern Colored League. It reorganized in 1929 as the American Negro League but only lasted one season. The decline of black baseball was caused in part by the Depression, which hit African Americans particularly hard and meant that black fans had less money to attend games.<sup>14</sup> Black baseball was not dead, but the folding of these leagues, along with Foster's death in December 1930, coincided with the decline of black ownership and allowed white booking agents to gain more control over black teams.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the failure of the NNL, Rube Foster, along with Frank Leland and Ed Bolden, paved the way for later African American baseball team owners. Many black owners sought to contribute to the black community through baseball, but others used their teams as legitimate fronts to their illegal numbers businesses. The list of black owners also included famous entertainers, which should not be surprising given the social connections between black musicians and black baseball players—especially at Gus Greenlee's Crawford Grille in Pittsburgh.<sup>16</sup> In 1931 Bill "Bojangles" Robinson formed the New York Black Yankees, who played many of their home games in Yankee Stadium. Louis Armstrong was another famous African American entertainer who owned a black baseball team, the New Orleans Nine.<sup>17</sup> Other owners who were less famous were powerful forces in the Negro Leagues. For instance, the Newark Eagles were owned by Abe and Effa Manley, the latter one of the more controversial owners in the league, grabbing headlines as an outspoken woman in a predominantly male arena. She was a white woman who "passed" for black when there was little social and economic incentive for doing so. In 1911, another black

owner, Cumberland Willis (Cum) Posey, formed the Pittsburgh-area Homestead Grays, which became one of the dominant black teams of the 1930s. Their most famous player was Josh Gibson, a power-hitting catcher who joined the club in 1931 at age nineteen and who was named (in a manner that now seems condescending) the “black Babe Ruth” for his mammoth home runs. Posey also founded the East-West League in 1932, but unfortunately it folded in before completing its first season.<sup>18</sup>

Posey’s main rival among owners of black teams was Gus Greenlee, a Pittsburgh hotel proprietor, bar owner, and numbers racketeer who exerted his power in the black criminal world and had connections to the white mob and local politicians but also contributed philanthropically to the black community. In 1930 he bought Pittsburgh’s Crawford Giants, which posed a threat to Posey’s nearby Homestead Grays. Greenlee also rankled Posey by signing Gibson away from the Grays and managed to land legendary pitcher Satchel Paige. More important, Greenlee formed the second Negro National League in 1933.<sup>19</sup> The second NNL was originally comprised of Greenlee’s Pittsburgh Crawfords, the Homestead Grays, the Chicago American Giants, the Indianapolis ABCs, the Nashville Elite Giants, the Detroit Stars, and the Columbus Blue Birds. Other teams that later joined the league were the Baltimore Black Sox, Bacharach Giants, and Cleveland Red Sox, though they were eventually dropped by the league.<sup>20</sup> As founder of the second NNL, Greenlee wanted the teams to be owned by African Americans and attract more black fans, many of whom attended major league games instead. Greenlee also wanted to reduce violence among players and tried to make player contracts more binding so as to prevent owners from raiding each other’s players. He made one of his most lasting contributions to black baseball in 1933 when he staged an all-star game of black players named the East-West game, which became a popular annual event. Although there had been a black World Series between the old Negro National League and the Eastern Colored League in 1924, and sporadically thereafter, the East-West games of the 1930s and 1940s were more popular. These games, played in Comiskey Field in Chicago, were so popular that they sometimes drew more fans (including some white fans) than the major-league All-Star games.<sup>21</sup>

Although the second NNL featured many great players during the middle and late 1930s, such as Gibson, Paige, Oscar Charleston, Judy Johnson, James “Cool Papa” Bell, Mule Suttles, Sam Bankhead, Ray Dandridge, Buck Leonard, and Buck O’Neil, the league struggled during this period for several reasons. First, the popularity of baseball among African Americans was challenged by the rise of Joe Louis and other black boxers.<sup>22</sup> Another problem faced by the league was finding suitable ballparks for games, because the only team owner who owned a stadium was Greenlee—and

Greenlee Field lacked a grandstand roof. Many teams rented major league stadiums such as Comiskey Park and Yankee Stadium when the stadiums' resident teams were on the road or off-season, but Negro League owners had to give much of their ticket revenue to white booking agents and stadium owners.

Another problem for the NNL, and for black baseball generally, was a lack of cooperation among the owners, who tended to sacrifice the welfare of the league to their own financial interests.<sup>23</sup> One result of this individualism was that owners frequently raided the players of other teams. It was often easy to lure players away from their teams because so many teams were financial instable and paid their players meagerly and irregularly.<sup>24</sup> Although such high player turnover was likely to vitiate fan interest in the players of a local team, owners had limited power in holding their players to their contracts. In fact, some Negro League team owners did not use contracts because they might not be able to honor them. In this sense, Negro League baseball differed greatly from major league baseball, in which the reserve clause and lack of free agency gave owners unlimited power to retain or trade their players. The issue of raiding other teams led to conflicts between the NNL and the Negro American League (NAL) in 1943, when a player shortage in the former league led to the raiding of NAL players. NAL owners threatened to boycott the lucrative East-West game before the conflict was resolved.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from the individualism of owners and their practice of raiding players of rival teams, another difficulty that black baseball faced was geographic. Greenlee sought to bring in eastern black teams to the NNL to benefit from the large African American urban population along the east coast from Washington to New York. The Philadelphia Stars, New York Cuban Giants, Newark Dodgers, and Brooklyn Eagles soon joined the fold, and the franchises in Detroit, Columbus, and Indianapolis dropped out. Unfortunately, by moving into the Philadelphia and New York baseball markets, the NNL became increasingly controlled by two powerful white booking agents, Eddie Gottlieb and Nat Strong. Eventually, the Chicago and Nashville franchises became geographically isolated from the eastern teams, making it difficult for these teams to travel and making it less appealing for the eastern clubs to make long trips west or south. As a result, the Chicago club left the NNL in January 1936.<sup>26</sup>

One solution to the geographic limitation of the eastern-based NNL was to form another league from the black teams in the South and Midwest. The NNL was later joined by the Negro American League, a group of Midwestern and southern teams that opened in 1937 under the leadership of Major Robert R. Jackson. The league was dominated by the Kansas City Monarchs but also included the Birmingham Black Barons, Indianapolis Athletics, Chicago American Giants, Cincinnati Tigers, Detroit Stars,

Cleveland Buckeyes, Memphis Red Sox, and St. Louis Stars. These teams were typically owned by white men, as opposed to the NNL teams, which were mostly owned by black numbers brokers. The NAL continued through 1959 despite the defection of many black players to the major leagues starting in the late 1940s.<sup>27</sup>

Although the NNL and NAL were products of racial segregation, black teams often played against white teams in exhibition games. Such games were important to African Americans because victories by black teams belied the notion of black inferiority. During the 1930s, black teams won about two-thirds of such games whose records survive, and the recorded results of 445 such games played between 1886 and 1948 show that black teams won approximately sixty-one percent of them.<sup>28</sup> Mark Ribowsky argues that in these games, white teams, including those featuring St. Louis Cardinals star pitcher Dizzy Dean, did not contain the most talented major leaguers, and that these victories did not prove that the black teams were superior; however, not all historians agree with this argument. Regardless of how the outcomes of these black-versus-white games should be interpreted, the games were lucrative for black teams because they drew many white fans. More importantly, these games suggested that African American and white players could play on the same diamonds, even if they could not share the same dugouts. Ribowsky argues that these games did little to move major league baseball toward integration, however, for the white sports press gave little coverage to these games.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately for black baseball, major league baseball's first commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, did what he could to stop these interracial contests after he came to power in 1920. In 1927 Landis forbade major league teams from competing against nonleague teams, a move that frustrated Foster.<sup>30</sup> Ribowsky claims that Landis's real purpose was to eliminate black teams from the baseball world. The banning of these black-versus-white games was much less detrimental to white teams than it was to financially struggling black teams, which gained considerable revenue from such events. When Landis died in 1944, he was succeeded by A. B. "Happy" Chandler, whose support for integration, though merely lukewarm and noncommittal, offered some hope to African American players and civil rights activists.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from Landis, another threat to Negro League baseball was the defection of several star players to baseball leagues in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, beginning in 1937. Defectors included Paige, Gibson, Sam Bankhead, and Cool Papa Bell. Black players were often lured by higher salaries (sometimes as much as \$1,000 per month plus expenses), lack of discrimination, and hero worship in Latin American countries.<sup>32</sup> However, playing baseball in the Dominican Republic was not exactly paradise for black players who played for Los Dragones, the team

formed by President Raphael Leonidas Trujillo Molina to enhance his prestige in a nation that enthusiastically supported baseball after its introduction in 1891. The Dominican dictator severely limited the freedom of the African American players on his team and ordered armed soldiers to escort them between the hotel and the baseball diamond.<sup>33</sup> For the most part, however, many African Americans preferred to play baseball in Latin America rather than in the Negro Leagues. Records show that between 1907 and 1960, at least 150 black players played at least one winter season in Cuba, over 120 in Mexico, 40 in the Dominican Republic, 60 in Puerto Rico, and 40 in Venezuela.<sup>34</sup> Greenlee vigorously opposed these defections, even though this was merely an international version of the practice of raiding other teams' players that had become so common in black baseball. It is no coincidence that Greenlee opposed such defections so strongly: his Pittsburgh Crawfords team was hit hardest by them. When Greenlee failed to have these players extradited, he banned them from his league.<sup>35</sup>

Another problem faced by the Negro Leagues occurred during World War II, when fuel shortages led the Office of Defense Transportation to limit the use of buses by professional baseball teams. Most Negro League teams traveled on their own buses instead of on trains, which were segregated in the South and which required teams to pay additional money for transportation between train stations and hotels. Thus, the ODT regulation placed financial burdens on both leagues, but especially the NAL, which was less concentrated geographically than the>NNL. In addition, whereas bus travel allowed teams to sleep on the bus, train travel made it necessary for teams to find accommodations, often difficult to do in the South. The ODT finally made an exemption for the NAL, which included teams in Memphis and Birmingham, and later did the same for the>NNL.<sup>36</sup>

Even when the ODT did not restrict the bus travel by Negro League teams, such travel placed a considerable strain on African American teams. Negro League schedules were less regular than those of the Major Leagues, and black teams did not play multiple consecutive games in one city, causing them to travel more and rest less between games than major league teams. Moreover, Negro League teams relied financially on barnstorming and most of them played over one hundred such games a year, a factor that added to players' travel fatigue.<sup>37</sup> To make matters worse, buses sometimes broke down, and accommodations were often difficult to find, particularly when barnstorming in locations without a large black population able to offer lodgings.

Black players struggled not only with travel-related difficulties but also with low salaries. During 1926, the monthly salary cap for the Eastern Colored League was \$3,000, but that number dipped to \$1,600 in 1933 among>NNL teams and rose to only \$2,600 in 1936 before increasing to \$8,000 in 1946, roughly equivalent to the pay earned by top-level minor

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league players.<sup>38</sup> A few star players, such as Satchel Paige, received good salaries, but most players received little. In 1922 the average Negro League player salary was \$135 per month, and although that figure rose to about \$250 per month by the end of the 1920s, it dropped precipitously during the Depression to between \$125 and \$150 per month.<sup>39</sup> Even when salaries peaked in the mid-1940s, players were forced to work in the winter unless they were fortunate enough to play winter ball.

Despite all the obstacles facing the Negro Leagues, they survived and, during the early and mid-1940s, thrived. The end of the Depression and the labor shortage caused by the war had already provided more opportunities for African American laborers and gave black fans more discretionary income. Much of the success of the Negro Leagues was due to the black sporting press. Black newspapers encouraged their readers to support local black teams and made it easier for fans to follow those teams. This promotion was especially important because Negro League games were rarely broadcast on radio and were not shown on television. These newspapers are also important sources of historical information for black teams and their players, but unfortunately, statistical information is often incomplete. Black newspapers did not have enough money to pay for beat reporters, so teams were responsible for reporting scores. Many teams did not report game results regularly, especially losses and non-league games.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, many black newspapers were weeklies, and games that occurred five or six days before a paper was published might not be considered recent enough to be newsworthy. As a result, star players like Josh Gibson did not get full credit for all of their accomplishments, and statistical gaps have been filled by legends. Despite the incomplete coverage of black teams by black newspapers, the Negro Leagues might not have survived without the support of these newspapers. Among the biggest supporters were the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *Chicago Defender*. The sporting pages of black newspapers often promoted marquee games like the East-West game or games between contenders as the greatest game ever played. Black sportswriters often complained that the white sports press often used a jocular tone in describing black players and Negro League games and resorted to condescension and racial stereotypes in doing so.<sup>41</sup>

The popularity of Negro League baseball among black fans was caused not only by the black press, but by the efforts of its owners and players as well, and black players and teams were often welcomed into African American communities. One reason for this hospitality was that they spent money in those communities. Perhaps more importantly, they served as symbols of success for people who were often denied success and respect by racial discrimination; star players countered the prevailing ideology of white supremacy by playing as well as—or better than—white major-leaguers.<sup>42</sup>

Another reason for the popularity of black baseball was its unique style of play. Negro League teams played a more exciting kind of baseball than the Major Leagues offered by emphasizing base-stealing, bunting, and hit-and-run plays. Pitchers also frequently doctored baseballs and benefited from scuffed baseballs, which were not replaced as often as in the major leagues because teams had less money to buy new ones.<sup>43</sup> Several black teams also included an element of comedy and showmanship in their game in order to attract fans and revenue. This style of baseball developed largely because so many black teams relied on barnstorming instead of regularly scheduled games; local residents might not be familiar with a visiting team and would need an extra incentive to attend games. This tradition of showmanship began with white-owned teams like the Cuban Giants and Page Fence Giants of the late 1800s. Perhaps the most famous of these teams was the Indianapolis Clowns (formerly the Ethiopian Clowns of Miami), owned by the white booking agent Syd Pollack.<sup>44</sup> As African American fans became more attracted to integrated major league teams in the 1950s, the Clowns often played up to white racial stereotypes in order to attract white spectators. The Clowns survived until 1984 and in their late years contained more white players than black ones. Perhaps the most racist and bizarre black team was the Zulu Cannibal Giants, who played in grass skirts and wore exotic war paint.<sup>45</sup>

Some individual players also pulled stunts to entertain fans. One catcher, Pepper Bassett, was known to catch some games in a rocking chair, and Satchel Paige is said to have called his infielders and outfielders off the field before striking out the side on more than one occasion. Beginning in the 1930s, however, many African American owners, players, reporters, and fans became increasingly critical of the tradition of clowning among black players. The white press often enjoyed this form of humor, no matter how degrading it was to the players. Paige, who was signed by the Cleveland Indians in July 1948, differed from most of the other black players who were signed by major league teams in the late 1940s in his comical personality and his refusal to conform to major-league expectations of proper behavior for players. By then, many African Americans who wished to emphasize black respectability in their push for integration found Paige an embarrassment.<sup>46</sup>

## **THE MOVE TOWARD INTEGRATION AND THE DECLINE OF THE NEGRO LEAGUES**

During World War II, the peak of success for the Negro Leagues, a golden opportunity emerged for integration of major league baseball, which struggled from a dearth of talent because of the number of white stars who served in the military overseas. One result of this talent shortage was a renewed discussion of integrating major league baseball, but no major

Shown from left: Brooklyn Dodgers baseball players John Jorgensen, Pee Wee Reese, Ed Stanky, and Jackie Robinson at Ebbets Field in New York, 1947.



AP Photo

league owner wanted—or dared—to sign a talented African American player to take the place of a white player, even a mediocre one. The old connection between integrated teams (or even regular competition between black and white teams) and interracial mingling was brought up as recently as July 1939, when New York Giants manager Bill Terry told the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “I do not think Negro players will ever be admitted to the majors. . . . The problem of mingling socially with the other players and traveling about the country together makes it impossible for us to admit the Negro player. I think they can be more successful with a league of their own.”<sup>47</sup> Although no rule barred African Americans from playing in major league baseball, a “gentlemen’s agreement” in place between owners since 1887 had never been violated. However, the apparent talent advantage that the Negro Leagues had over the depleted major leagues during the war undercut the anti-integration arguments of major league team owners that black players were inferior. Though some owners and major league officials suggested the possibility of integration in the future, none of them took



any concrete steps toward that goal.<sup>48</sup> When the war ended and many white star players returned to the major leagues, owners tried to return to business as usual rather than seriously entertain plans for integration. Adding to the resistance to integration was the fact that many major-leaguers were Southerners who strongly favored segregation. Even if white major league players and owners who opposed integration were not necessarily racist, they feared that white fans would desert the game and that Southern towns that hosted spring training would withdraw their hospitality.<sup>49</sup>

In 1945, Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey began to advocate integrating the major leagues. He puzzled both sides of the controversy, however, by establishing the all-black United States League, which would avoid the irregular schedules and rowdy player behavior, as well as the practice of raiding other teams' players, that characterized the Negro Leagues.<sup>50</sup> The league did not prosper, but it served Rickey's project of crossing major league baseball's color divide, a scheme that he kept secret from the public as long as possible. Rickey's black league allowed him to groom black players as candidates for his integration experiment. His short list included Don Newcombe and Roy Campanella, but Jackie Robinson, a shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs, seemed like the best candidate. Robinson was a gifted, highly motivated athlete who accomplished the rare feat of lettering in four sports at UCLA (baseball, basketball, football, and track). It is ironic that he agreed to Rickey's demand that he turn the other cheek when faced with racist heckling, for he had protested against racial discrimination while in the United States Army and was brought before a court martial (and acquitted) for doing so.<sup>51</sup>

In signing Robinson, Rickey offered no money to the Monarchs; by nullifying any claim that the Monarchs had on Robinson, he engaged in the same practice of raiding rival teams' players that was so prevalent in the Negro Leagues. The lack of a reserve clause in Negro League baseball contracts, as well as the lack of formal contracts for some Negro League players, made it difficult for the leagues' owners to argue against major league owners' signing of black players with little or no compensation. This trend was the first step in major league baseball's destruction of the Negro Leagues through integration.<sup>52</sup>

For this reason, it is not surprising that Negro League owners often felt ambivalent about the desegregation of the major leagues. On the one hand, many of them had been pushing for integration since the 1930s. However, they did not expect that integration would lead to the demise of the Negro Leagues. Some had envisioned the major leagues incorporating entire black teams rather than breaking them up by signing players from various teams. Others had hoped that some Negro American League teams could serve as minor leagues for the majors.<sup>53</sup> Effa Manley, co-owner of the Newark Eagles, expressed her disappointment with players who showed no

loyalty to their teams when they were signed by major league teams, and also criticized these owners for not compensating Negro League teams for the players they signed. Compensation would have allowed the Negro Leagues to continue as minor-league feeders to the majors, but like Rickey, other major league owners paid Negro League owners little or nothing for the black players they signed and were not interested in using Negro Leagues as a source of additional minor league teams.<sup>54</sup>

This lack of compensation received little criticism in the black press, which was more interested in the end of Jim Crow baseball. Although the white sporting press downplayed Robinson's major league debut and the first crossing of the color line in the majors in sixty years, the black press described it as a huge civil rights victory.<sup>55</sup> Ironically, African American journalists such as Wendell Smith, who had promoted black baseball, also contributed to—and celebrated—the demise of the Negro Leagues by calling for integration in the major leagues.<sup>56</sup> In addition, by shifting its focus to Jackie Robinson and other black pioneers in major league baseball, the black sports press neglected the Negro Leagues, diminishing interest among black fans and consequently causing the financial ruin of many black teams.

One tactic that the Indianapolis Clowns tried to attract fans during the exodus of Negro League players to the major leagues during the 1950s was signing female players. As in the major leagues, the presence of women in the Negro Leagues was nearly nonexistent, except for the outspoken and powerful Effa Manley. However, at least three female players joined the Negro Leagues: Toni Stone, who played second base for the Indianapolis Clowns in 1953 and the Kansas City Monarchs in 1954; Connie Morgan, who played for the Clowns in 1954 and 1955, also at second base; and Mamie "Peanut" Johnson, a right-handed pitcher for the Clowns from 1953 to 1955.<sup>57</sup> Although these players might not have been signed by the Negro League teams were it not for the defection of the top male players into the major leagues, it is worth noting that the Negro Leagues and not the All-American Girls Baseball League of the 1940s and 1950s allowed these players to cross major barriers.

Actually, the Negro Leagues might have survived if many white major league owners, who wanted to limit the integration of the leagues to the signing of Robinson, had had their way.<sup>58</sup> But Rickey's signing of Robinson and the latter's success with the Dodgers (in 1947 he batted .297 and was named National League Rookie of the Year) was a harbinger of integration in organized baseball and the success of black players in the majors. In addition, the flood of black fans from Negro League games to Dodgers games was a sign of the impending death of the Negro Leagues. This demise was continued by several other African American players who soon crossed the color line into the major leagues: second baseman Larry Doby

of the Newark Eagles, who became the first black American Leaguer when he signed with the Cleveland Indians in July 1947; Paige, who at age forty-two became Doby's teammate in Cleveland; Newcombe, Campanella, and outfielder Monte Irvin of the Newark Bears, who signed with the Dodgers; Monarch outfielders Willard Brown and Hank Thompson (St. Louis Browns); and Memphis Red Sox pitcher Dan Bankhead (Brooklyn).<sup>59</sup> Later, other Negro League players would be signed by major league teams and become stars, including Willie Mays of the Minneapolis Millers, who signed with the New York Giants in 1951, and Henry "Hank" Aaron of the Indianapolis Clowns, who was signed by the Boston Braves in 1952. The fact that the most integrated teams in the National League, the Dodgers and the Giants, won eight of ten pennants between 1947 and 1956 was largely caused by the talent of their black players; former Negro League players won nine MVP awards in the National League between 1949 and 1959.<sup>60</sup> The loss of these players to the major leagues and their success there led to a mass exodus of African American fans from Negro League games to major league games. As a result, Negro League owners cut player salaries, a move that encouraged players to look for higher salaries in the Mexican League if they could not be signed by a major league team. The NNL disbanded after the end of the 1948 season, though some teams continued to play non-league games, and the NAL continued until 1960, when the Birmingham Black Barons folded.<sup>61</sup>

Contributing to the decline of the Negro Leagues was the increase in televised major league games. Although televisions were less common in black homes than in white homes in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they were becoming more affordable by the early 1950s, and black baseball fans without televisions could often see black major leaguers on television at a neighborhood bar, which would usually be closer than the nearest Negro League game and would not require a ticket.<sup>62</sup> Television also encouraged loyalty among viewers, which gave integrated major league teams an advantage over Negro League teams when it came to attracting black fans.

The demise of the Negro Leagues roughly paralleled the integration of the major leagues, but integration came too slow and too late for many Negro League stars whose careers ended before the mid-1940s. Such was the case for slugging catcher Josh Gibson, who died of a brain tumor in January 1947 at the age of 35.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately for Gibson, he did not get the same opportunity that Paige and other Negro League stars had to play in the major leagues. For black players who were active during the years following Robinson's breakthrough, the process of integration was frustratingly slow. As a result, many talented black players, such as Minneapolis Millers star third baseman Ray Dandridge, were not signed by major league teams. Years after Robinson broke the color line with the Brooklyn Dodgers, most teams featured only one or two black players—three or four

appeared to be the limit—and several teams remained lily-white. Although fifty-four black players played in the majors in 1950, only six of the sixteen major league teams were integrated by 1952, five years after Robinson and Doby broke into the National and American Leagues, respectively.<sup>64</sup> The New York Yankees remained exclusively white until Kansas City Monarchs catcher Elston Howard joined the team in 1955, eight years after Robinson joined the cross-town Dodgers. The Philadelphia Phillies resisted integration until shortstop John Kennedy joined the team in 1957, and the Detroit Tigers until third-baseman Ossie Virgil joined the team in 1958. The Boston Red Sox remained the last all-white team until it promoted infielder Elijah “Pumpsie” Green on July 21, 1959. Since then, the numbers of African American major league players steadily increased, and by 1961, 77 of 450 major league players (just over seventeen percent) were African American.<sup>65</sup> Integration was most visible among starting position players, as opposed to pitchers and backup position players. In fact, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in the major leagues among utility and reserve players, a fact that suggests that mediocre white players have a better chance of making a major league team than mediocre black players.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the African American presence in major league baseball has been declining in recent years. In July 2003, only ten percent of major league players were African American, a decline from twenty-seven percent in 1975.<sup>67</sup> When the Houston Astros made their first World Series appearance in 2005, some commentators pointed out the lack of African American players on the team.

## FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JACKIE ROBINSON

Robinson’s significance in baseball history as the first player to integrate the majors is nearly equaled by the importance of another African American player, St. Louis Cardinals center fielder Curt Flood. Flood made his mark on major league baseball history by challenging the reserve clause, which had been in effect since the 1880s. The clause gave owners complete control over where players would play—they could trade players at will, and players had no authority to refuse or demand a trade. After the 1969 season, the Cardinals traded Flood, along with Tim McCarver, Joe Hoerner, and Byron Browne, to the Philadelphia Phillies for slugger Dick Allen, Cookie Rojas, and Jerry Johnson.<sup>68</sup> Flood, who had played in St. Louis since 1958, refused to accept the trade because he felt that Philadelphia was a racist city, but his refusal violated the reserve clause. He challenged the clause in a district court, a circuit court, and the U. S. Supreme Court, which finally ruled against him in 1972. Despite this setback, the ruling paved the way for later cases involving white pitchers Andy Messersmith (Los Angeles Dodgers) and Dave McNally (Baltimore Orioles)

The Atlanta Braves' Hank Aaron eyes the flight of the ball after hitting his 715th career homer in a game against the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1974. Dodgers pitcher Al Downing, catcher Joe Ferguson, and umpire David Davidson look on.



*AP Photo/Harry Harris*

that established the right of free agency.<sup>69</sup> In this cynical age of superstar free agents receiving eight-figure salaries, it is important to remember that Flood made it possible for players to have some choice regarding where they play and to earn market value for their play.

In the sixty years following Robinson's debut with the Dodgers, African American players have been among baseball's elite in all positions, but especially as outfielders and first-basemen. Arguably the best African American player was Henry Aaron, who played for twenty-three seasons in the major leagues, mostly with the Milwaukee and Atlanta Braves (the team moved to Atlanta after the end of the 1965 season). In addition to being an excellent right-fielder and base runner, he broke Babe Ruth's major league career home run record in April 1974 and finished his career in 1976 with the Milwaukee Brewers with 755 home runs, a record that stood for thirty-one years. Unfortunately, he received hate mail and even death threats shortly before breaking Ruth's record with a home run against Los Angeles pitcher Al Downing. Aaron's major league records for career runs batted in (2,297) and total bases (6,856) are less well-known. In addition, in 1957 he earned the National League's Most Valuable Player Award and led the Milwaukee Braves to a World Series victory. He also was elected to the All-Star team twenty-one times and finished his career with a .305 batting average.

Several other African American players have joined Aaron as leaders in major league baseball records. For instance, Barry Bonds broke Aaron's home run record in 2007 and finished that season with 762 home runs; Willie Mays (660) and Frank Robinson (586) rank fourth and seventh, respectively, in the home run record list; and at the time of this writing Ken Griffey Jr. holds sixth place with 600 home runs.<sup>70</sup> Bonds also broke the single-season home run record with seventy-three in 2001. As for pitching, one of the most dominating pitchers was Bob Gibson, who played for the St. Louis Cardinals from 1959 to 1975 and finished his career with a record of 251 wins and 174 losses, 3,117 strikeouts, and a 2.91 ERA. After the 1968 season, when Gibson compiled a 1.12 ERA, Major League baseball decided to lower the pitching mound by five inches.<sup>71</sup> In base-stealing, no player was more successful than Rickey Henderson, who stole 1,406 bases while playing for numerous major league teams during a career that spanned from 1979 to 2003. He also owns the major league career record for runs scored (2,295) and held the record for walks (2,190) until he was surpassed by Bonds, who finished the 2007 with 2,558.<sup>72</sup>

Because most of the attention paid to African Americans in baseball has focused on individual players, less attention has been given to managers, coaches, and umpires. Major League baseball did not include an African American coach before Buck O'Neil was hired by the Chicago Cubs in 1962. There were no African American managers in the majors until Frank Robinson took the helm for the Cleveland Indians in 1975; he later managed the San Francisco Giants, Baltimore Orioles, and Montreal Expos/Washington Nationals.<sup>73</sup> Since then, several African Americans—many of them former star players—have served as managers, including Dusty Baker (San Francisco Giants, Chicago Cubs, and Cincinnati Reds), Don Baylor (Cubs and Colorado Rockies), Cito Gaston (Toronto Blue Jays), Lloyd McClendon (Pittsburgh Pirates), Hal McRae (Kansas City Royals and Tampa Bay Devil Rays), and Willie Randolph (New York Mets). Many more black former players have coached at the major and minor league levels. Nevertheless, despite Aaron's efforts to bring more African Americans to high positions in major league baseball, only three African Americans have served as general managers. Bill Lucas of the Atlanta Braves was the first in 1977, and Bob Watson was hired as general manager of the Houston Astros in 1994. At present the only black general manager is Ken Williams of the Chicago White Sox. African Americans are also underrepresented in front-office and scouting positions in organized baseball. In 1982, African Americans filled 32 of 913 white-collar jobs in baseball, and only 15 of 568 scouts were African American. In 1987, blacks filled merely 17 of the top 879 administrative posts in the sport, and 15 of the 26 teams had no African Americans in management jobs.<sup>74</sup> Major league baseball's track record on hiring African American umpires is equally

dismal; in fact, only a few have ever been hired by the major leagues. Emmett Ashford broke the color line in major league umpiring in 1966 in the American League; in the National League, Art Williams became the first black umpire in 1973.<sup>75</sup> Sadly, the changes caused by Robinson's breaking the color line in baseball have mostly been limited to players and coaches.

Despite the integration of the Major Leagues that began in 1947 and the excellent careers of many African American players over the past six decades, baseball today does not always offer the same opportunities and recognition to African Americans that it does to white Americans. In the early 1970s, the National Baseball Hall of Fame began inducting former Negro League players, and by 2005 eighteen Negro League players had been inducted. In 2006, twelve more African American players who played before integration were inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Kansas City Monarchs first baseman Buck O'Neil, who had done more than any former player to educate the public about the Negro Leagues and who was a well-known ambassador of the game, gave the induction speech but was not among the inductees; unfortunately, he died in October of that year at the age of ninety-four.<sup>76</sup> Though it seems likely that he will be inducted posthumously, the fact that he did not have the pleasure of formal recognition in his lifetime symbolizes the belated recognition of Negro League players in general.

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# Golf

*Marvin P. Dawkins and A. C. Tellison Jr.*

Since its earliest appearance in the United States, golf has developed into one of America's favorite sport pastimes. American golfers have contributed to its widespread popularity throughout the world. Among the most notable professional golfers today is Eldrick "Tiger" Woods, who is highly regarded worldwide both as a player and as an ambassador for the game. In fact, Tiger Woods's meteoric rise to the top of the world of professional golf has created an association between African Americans and excellence much like that created in basketball by the highly acclaimed former professional athlete Michael Jordan. Both Jordan and Woods have projected a positive image for their respective sports. However, unlike Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods's role as the only person of African American heritage currently playing on the regular professional golf tour raises questions about the reason that there is a lack of an African American presence in golf. This chapter addresses this issue by focusing on the participation of African Americans in golf in the context of the history of American race relations and the cumulative impact of institutionalized barriers in golf that have shaped the opportunity structure faced by blacks and other minorities.

## EARLY INVOLVEMENT: THE JIM CROW ERA TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS PERIOD

The early experiences of African Americans in golf reflect the larger historical struggle of blacks to overcome racial discrimination in America. Although it is not widely known, the earliest African American presence in golf coincided with the introduction of the sport to America's white elite in the late 1800s.<sup>1</sup> Despite a commonly held assumption that black interest in golf is fairly recent, African Americans began their involvement in the sport while serving as caddies for wealthy whites at exclusive country clubs during the "Jim Crow" period of segregation in the 1890s. In the role of caddie, they also developed as players. However, unlike many young whites who began as caddies only to later develop as successful golfers—including such

notable pioneers of golf as Walter Hagen and Gene Sarazen—black youth who caddied were prevented by the restrictive racial climate from moving up to the professional ranks. The experiences of John Shippen, widely recognized as the first successful African American competitor in golf, illustrate how long and difficult the journey was for future African American aspirants to the game. Shippen was introduced to golf in the 1890s and became involved in tournaments held by the United States Golf Association (USGA) from the mid-1890s—when the organization was founded—to 1913, shortly before the establishment of the Professional Golfers Association (PGA). Shippen competed in the second USGA championship tournament in 1896 over the objections of several of the white entrants who didn't want to play with him or with another minority entrant, Oscar Bunn, a member of the Shinnecock Indian nation. Amazingly, at a time when the top golfers were transplants from England who would dominate major American golf tournaments for many years to come, this young African American caddie finished tied for fifth place. Shippen competed in several other USGA tournaments and, although not accorded by whites the recognition he deserved, became well known in the black community as the first “colored pro golfer.” When the PGA was formed in 1916, Shippen was not invited to join; the racially restrictive environment of this period ensured that Shippen and other black caddies would not rise through the career path from the caddie ranks to the professional level open to white caddies who aspired to, and often became, golf professionals.<sup>2</sup> However, Shippen and other blacks who began as caddies became recognized as “colored pros” in black communities throughout the United States, where they also served as catalysts for the spread of golf. Shippen, for example, quietly established himself as a prime mover of golf for over 30 years throughout the Northeast, especially in the Washington, D.C.–Baltimore area during the 1920s, and later as club professional at the popular, black-operated Shady Rest Golf and Country Club in Westfield (Scotch Plains), New Jersey. Like Shippen, African Americans in other parts of the country were drawing upon experiences gained through caddying to become good players even though racial barriers left them without opportunities to compete on an equal footing with whites. Although the PGA initially excluded blacks from becoming members in adherence to prevailing racial norms, by the 1940s black golfers were well established as successful players despite the segregated white world's lack of recognition of them. Anticipating possible action by African American golfers to seek entry to the PGA, in 1943 the organization formalized its discriminatory custom of denying membership to blacks by inserting a clause in its constitution to that effect. This PGA constitutional amendment became widely known in golf circles as the “Caucasian only” clause.<sup>3</sup>

When the black middle class became attracted to golf and began to form its own country clubs on a widespread basis, beginning in the 1920s,

opportunities increased for African Americans to play as recreational, amateur, and professional golfers. Thus, black caddies who became golf instructors and were recognized as “professionals” in their own community were provided a showcase for displaying their talents as the black elite clubs organized golf tournaments and, in some instances, spearheaded the establishment of black-owned golf courses. The earliest golf course at a historically black college, for example, was built at Tuskegee Institute in the mid-1920s under the leadership of its famed athletic director, Cleve L. “Major” Abbott. In some cities, African Americans pushed for the establishment of public golf courses for blacks under the principle of “separate but equal” (e.g., Langston Golf Course in Washington, D.C.); in other cities, middle-class blacks built private golf courses (e.g., Lincoln Golf Course in Jacksonville, Florida). Black clubs, unlike their white counterparts, did not exist purely to promote elite values. Some of the black golf clubs took the lead in fighting discrimination in the sport. These struggles, which began in the 1920s with efforts to gain access to segregated public golf courses, were expanded during the period of the modern civil rights movement of the 1950s and beyond, targeting the different forms that racial discrimination in golf took, including the PGA’s infamous “Caucasian only” clause.<sup>4</sup>

Elite blacks developed their own organizations to promote golf among African Americans in the face of white exclusion. Among such organizations, the most well known nationally was the United Golfers Association, better known as the UGA. Founded in 1926, the UGA became the African American counterpart to the PGA, although its level of resource support and organizational sophistication did not equal that of the PGA. However, unlike the PGA, the UGA was open to anyone who had a desire to play. The UGA had a network of local affiliates and sponsored a national championship annually. Much like the Negro baseball leagues, which reached their heyday in the 1940s, the UGA facilitated black participation in golf, producing many champions and star performers. Among them are the UGA “National Negro Open” tournament championship winners from 1926, the year of the first official UGA tournament, and 1961, the year that the “Caucasian only” clause was removed, with the year won shown in parenthesis: Harry Jackson (1926), Robert Ball (1927), Porter Washington (1928), Robert Ball (1929), Edison Marshall (1930, 1931), John Brooks Dendy (1932), Howard Wheeler (1933), Robert Ball (1934), Solomon Hughes (1935), John Brooks Dendy (1936, 1937), Howard Wheeler (1938), Cliff Strickland (1939), Hugh Smith (1940), Robert Ball (1941), no tournament held 1942–1945, Howard Wheeler (1946, 1947, 1948), Ted Rhodes (1949, 1950, 1951), Charlie Sifford (1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956), Ted Rhodes (1957), Howard Wheeler (1958), Richard Thomas (1959), Charlie Sifford (1960), and Pete Brown (1961).<sup>5</sup> The sponsors of UGA

tournaments and some of the more highly regarded African American golf champions included major sporting figures, such as boxing champions Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, and celebrities from the entertainment world, such as popular singer and musical entertainer Billy Eckstine.

Although golfing exploits of “colored pros” were reported through the black press in such widely read newspapers as *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Chicago Defender*, and *The Baltimore Afro-American*, virtually no coverage existed in white newspapers. A few of the most successful African American golfers covered in the black press gained national recognition, but most were better known regionally and locally. A sample of the hundreds of African American golfers who competed successfully in golf during the Jim Crow era and received recognition in the black press is given below to illustrate the longevity, regional distribution, and visibility of black golfing activity in the pre–Civil Rights period:

- *John Shippen* became the first African American to play in a golf tournament sponsored by whites when he participated in the second USGA national championship tournament in 1896 over the objections of several white entrants.
- *Harry Jackson* won the 1925 International Golf Championship, a fore-runner of the inaugural UGA Negro National Open championship, played the following year, which he also won.
- *Edison Marshall* led a delegation of black golfers driving to Chicago from New Orleans during the Great Depression in 1931 to defend his title, thus becoming the first back-to-back winner of the UGA Negro National Open championship (1930–1931).
- *John Brooks Dendy* was the UGA Negro National Open champion in 1932, 1936, and 1937, becoming only the second person to win three UGA championship titles.
- *Robert “Pat” Ball* was UGA Negro National Open champion in 1927, 1929, 1934, and 1941 (becoming the first four-time UGA champion). He was among a small contingent of “colored” golfers who competed in interracial public links tournaments. Ball filed and was granted a court injunction to play in the 1932 national public links golf tournament in Philadelphia. In 1938, he became the first black golfer to be named teaching pro at a municipal golf course (Palos Park near Chicago).
- *Howard Wheeler* was well known for his unorthodox playing style. He used a cross-handed grip and often converted a folded matchbox into a golf tee. Wheeler was the only player to win UGA Negro National Open championships across three decades (1933, 1938, 1946, 1947, 1948, and 1958).
- *Clyde Martin* was named golf pro at the famed Langston Golf Course (Washington, D.C.) when it opened in 1939 and the following year

was selected by heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis to be his personal golf tutor. He also won the first Joe Louis Open golf tournament championship in 1941.

- *Calvin Searles* was co-runner-up to Clyde Martin at the first Joe Louis Open golf tournament in 1941 and one of the top black pros before he was killed in action during World War II.
- *Sanders Mason* was a four-time winner of the Tampa (Florida) city championship during the 1930s and 1940s and the founder of the Tampa Golf Association.
- *Everett Payne* was a member of the famed Royal Golf Club of Washington, D.C., and won the Eastern Golf Association's Pennsylvania Open in 1941. He finished among the top players in UGA events and other tournaments during the 1940s and 1950s.
- *Ralph Dawkins* won the first Florida State Junior Golf Tournament in 1928 and became teaching pro at the Lincoln Golf and Country Club in Jacksonville, Florida (1941–1949), one of the few black-owned private golf courses in the United States.
- *William "Bill" Spiller* turned professional in 1947 after winning the amateur title at the Joe Louis Open golf tournament in 1946. He was a leader in fighting to end racial discrimination in golf. He sued the PGA in 1948 for not allowing him and fellow black professional Ted Rhodes to enter the PGA-sponsored Richmond (California) Open Golf Tournament. Spiller's protests against the PGA for not allowing him to enter the San Diego Open in 1952 as a pro golfer led to a breakthrough that permitted a few black golfers to enter the PGA tour for selected tournaments.
- *Theodore "Ted" Rhodes* was widely acknowledged in black golfing circles as the top black golfer nationally from the mid 1940s to the mid 1950s, winning UGA Negro National Open Championships in 1949, 1950, and 1951 and Joe Louis Open championships in 1946, 1947, 1948, and 1949. He was the only player to win the UGA and Joe Louis Open championships in the same year (1949).
- *Joe "Roach" Delancey* was personal golf tutor to middleweight boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson and teaching pro to many other black entertainers and celebrities. He won back-to-back UGA Negro National Open Championships (amateur division) for three years (1953, 1954, and 1955) and, until his death in 2002, conducted a highly successful youth instructional golf program (the Joe Roach Junior Minority Golf Foundation) in Miami.
- *Charles "Charlie" Sifford* won six UGA Negro National Open Championships (1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, and 1960) and became the first African American to win a major, predominantly white golf tournament (the Long Beach Open in 1957). In 1964, Sifford became the first black golfer to gain full membership status in the PGA.<sup>6</sup>

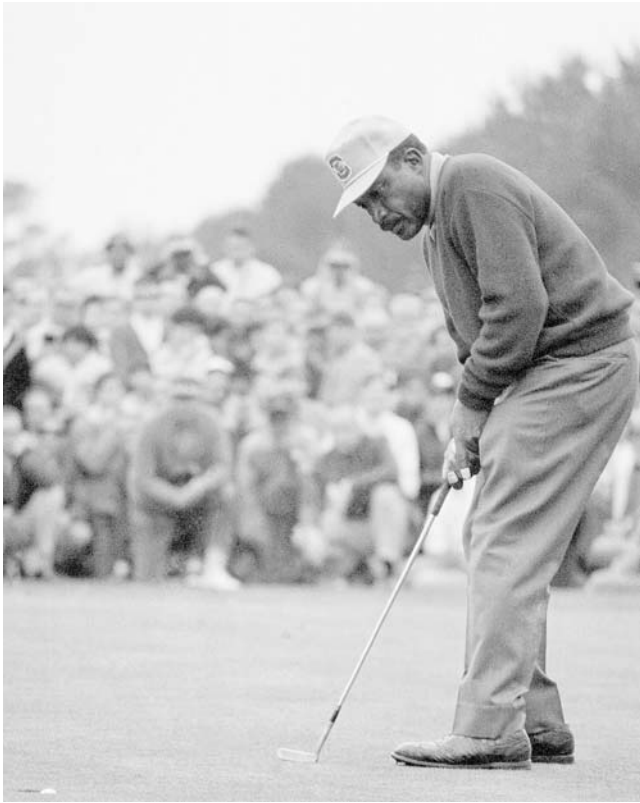
It should also be noted that African American women contributed to the development of golf in the black community, both as organizers and players. For example, the Wake Robin Golf Club was formed in 1936 by thirteen women as the world's first independent, African American organization for black women, with Helen Webb Harris serving as its first president. One of its members, Paris Brown, was the first woman to assume the tournament directorship of the UGA. Among the successful African American amateur women golfers during this period were Marie Thompson, Julia Siler, Lucy (Williams) Mitchum, Ella C. Able, Melnee Moye, Cleo Ball, Thelma Cowan, Edline Thornton, Alice Stewart, Ann Gregory, and Ethel Funches.

## THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS PERIOD AND BEYOND

Most of these early-generation “colored pros” did not benefit from efforts to desegregate the sport, something that did not begin to achieve even modest success until the late 1950s. Not until major challenges were mounted against the exclusion of black golfers from PGA-sponsored events during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s did changes begin to occur. Although a suit filed against the PGA on behalf of three black golfers in 1948 (Bill Spiller, Ted Rhodes, and Madison Gunter) was withdrawn when the PGA promised to examine its “Caucasian only” membership clause at its next meeting, this legal pressure stimulated more aggressive actions. Four years later, in 1952, black golfers Bill Spiller, Joe Louis, and Eural Clark challenged the rejection of their attempt to enter the PGA-sponsored San Diego Open golf tournament. When the notoriety of the popular ex-champion boxer Joe Louis attracted national attention to the controversy, the PGA began permitting limited participation by black golfers in a few of its events, all the while steadfastly maintaining its “Caucasian only” policy. By late 1959, under tremendous social and legal pressure, the PGA granted the status of “approved tournament player” to black golfer Charlie Sifford and ended its “Caucasian only” membership policy in 1961. Although significant, removal of the “Caucasian only” policy at the height of the civil rights movement that was sweeping across the South proved more symbolic than real, for there was no contingent of black golfers poised to endure the informal resistance that Charlie Sifford met along the way to becoming the first African American to gain full PGA membership in 1964. Despite this long-awaited opportunity, the vast majority of African American golfers of the “colored pro golfer” generation either were dead, were too far past their prime to mount a serious challenge, or had simply seen their hopes fade away. As Sifford lamented in his 1992 autobiography, *Just Let Me Play: The Story of Charlie Sifford, The First Black PGA Golfer*,



**Charlie Sifford is shown in action during the opening round of the Thunderbird Golf Tournament at the Westchester Country Club in 1963.**



*AP Photo*

Most of the black guys who had come up with me had long since given up the idea of playing golf for a living. They might come out for a Negro tournament here or there, but they'd lost their dedication to the game. The struggle was just too hard and was obviously a losing battle. They went back to their homes and their jobs at the fertilizer plant or the grocery store or the post office, and golf was just an old memory to them.<sup>7</sup>

However, the explanation offered by Sifford to account for the dwindled pool of Jim Crow era black golfers, which he believes made unlikely a mass movement of them pushing for PGA entry, may be overly simplistic. A more complex answer lies in understanding the cumulative forces at work throughout the segregation era that decreased the chances that African

American golfers would be able to take advantage of the removal of the racial barrier to their participation in the sport on a wider basis. In-depth interviews with some of the legendary black golfers who played as professionals during the Jim Crow era revealed a common pattern for African Americans who sought to participate in golf that contributes to the explanation of why so few were able to join the ranks of the PGA after the restrictive racial barrier was removed:

1. They were all introduced to golf as caddies at a very young age. The caddying experience also provided opportunities to learn and practice the game on a limited basis and to participate in caddie tournament competitions created by their white employers. These opportunities dissipated after the motorized golf cart reduced dependency on caddies for transporting golf bags.
2. As they progressed, contact with other black players was frequent and included golf tournaments created by blacks themselves. Black golf organizations at the local, regional, and national levels became the avenues through which golf could be pursued by black golfers in the face of exclusion from white golfing activity. Desegregated public golf courses and reduced activities of black golf organizations led to fewer African American golfers being cultivated and prepared for competitive play.
3. Despite segregation, contact with white golfers occasionally occurred in some integrated settings (e.g., Europe, liberal states, private invitations by whites). However, segregation and discrimination, resulting in restricted contact with white professional golfers, was the dominant experience. Restricted contact between black and white golfers continued after the PGA removed the "Caucasian only" clause, because much of the interaction between professional golfers took place in private settings exempt from desegregation requirements.
4. When successful efforts to overcome the long-standing discriminatory treatment of black golfers was finally achieved, most Jim Crow-era golfers were past their prime, and the limited desegregation of the sport nevertheless saw other institutionalized barriers (primarily financial) remain.<sup>8</sup>

After the more than four decades since Sifford's breakthrough in 1964, only a handful of African Americans have gained PGA membership or competed on the PGA Tour as "approved tournament players" (something that does not require full membership in the PGA). The earliest group of post-Civil Rights "breakthrough" African American golfers, who have also been referred to as "Modern [Black] Professional Golfers,"<sup>9</sup>

include some players of the 1960s and 1970s who came directly from the ranks of the UGA tournament "circuit," which served as a launching pad from which players took their shots at big-time golf on the PGA Tour. The most successful of this group to join Charlie Sifford on tour were Pete Brown and Lee Elder. Brown's win at the 1964 Waco Turner Open was the first by an African American in a PGA Tour event.<sup>10</sup> In 1975, Lee Elder became the first African American invited to play in the prestigious Masters Championship Tournament.<sup>11</sup> Earlier, Brown had won back-to-back UGA Negro National Open championships in 1961 and 1962.<sup>12</sup> Elder had also experienced success in UGA tournaments, having won four Negro National Opens between 1963 and 1967.<sup>13</sup> Noteworthy among the accomplishments of the few successful African American golfers after Lee Elder's appearance in the Masters are those of Calvin Pete, especially during the 1980s, when his feats on the PGA tour included eleven wins and garnered him the Vardon Trophy for low stroke average in 1984, the Tournament Players Championship in 1985, and membership on the U.S. Ryder Cup teams of 1983 and 1985.<sup>14</sup> The following is a complete list of all African Americans who have played on the regular PGA Tour (along with the year they joined the Tour) since Charlie Sifford's initial appearance as an approved tournament player in 1960: Rafe Botts (1961), Gordon Chavis (1962), Pete Brown (1963), William Wright (1964), James Black (1965), James Walker Jr. (1965), Lee Elder (1967), Henry Baraben (1968), Howard Brown (1969), George Johnson (1968), Curtis Sifford (1969), Cliff Brown (1970), James Dent (1970), Charlie Owens (1970), Chuck Thorpe (1972), Al Green (1973), Nathaniel Starks (1973), Calvin Peete (1975), Jim Thorpe (1976), Bobby Strobe (1976), Ron Terry (1976), Lee Carter (1979), Al Morton (1981), Tom Woodard (1981), and Adrian Stills (1985).<sup>15</sup> However, only three African American women have been members of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). Although no African American women are currently competing on the LPGA Tour, the three who have are Althea Gibson (1963), Renee Powell (1967), and LaRee Pearl Suggs (1994).<sup>16</sup>

Although some of the golfers listed above have competed in the past or currently compete on the Senior PGA Tour (e.g., Rafe Botts, Charles Owens, Chuck Thorpe, Jim Dent, Jim Thorpe, Bobby Strobe, and Walter Morgan), Tiger Woods is the only golfer of African American ancestry playing on the regular PGA Tour as of 2007. Since turning pro in 1996, Woods's phenomenal success and the attention generated by his African American and multi-ethnic identity have piqued interest in the racial history of golf. This interest was actually stimulated at the beginning of the 1990s, before Tiger Woods attracted national attention as a budding star in the mid-1990s, by two major events: the "Shoal Creek Affair" and Charlie Sifford's publication of his autobiography.

Although private, elite country clubs in America have a long history of maintaining membership rolls that are exclusively white, the Shoal Creek (Alabama) Country Club came under scrutiny in 1990 when it was revealed that a championship tournament of the Professional Golfers Association Tour was being sponsored by a golf club that openly excluded blacks from holding membership.<sup>17</sup> The ensuing protest generated by this event also called attention to American golf's past history of racially discriminatory treatment of black golfers during the segregation era.<sup>18</sup>

In 1992, on the heels of this critical examination of past race relations in golf came reactions to the biography of Charlie Sifford, the widely recognized pioneering black pro, who released his autobiography, *Just Let Me Play: The Story of Charlie Sifford, the First Black PGA Golfer*. Although Sifford's recounting of his experiences stimulated further interest in discriminatory treatment of black golfers of the past, by some accounts Sifford's autobiography represented the isolated experiences of one person who was characterized as selectively recounting "bitter memories" that had little bearing on the current treatment of blacks, generally, in the sport.<sup>19</sup>

## **LINKING TIGER WOODS TO THE LEGACY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN GOLF**

After Tiger Woods turned professional in 1996, only one year later (1997) he won the prestigious Masters Golf Championship, becoming the first person of African American heritage to win this award. Interest in the subject of black golfers of the past was further stimulated as Woods himself became a catalyst when his first public comment upon winning the Masters paid homage to the black golf professionals who went before him and upon whose pioneering shoulders his accomplishment stood. Woods specifically recognized the efforts of black golfers Lee Elder (in 1975 the first black to play in the Masters), Charlie Sifford (in 1964 the first black to gain full PGA membership), and Ted Rhodes. Although Rhodes is regarded by some as the greatest black golfer before Tiger Woods, he was virtually unknown to the millions of television viewers who heard Woods's tribute. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that Rhodes, along with many other black professional golfers, were prevented from joining the PGA Tour while in their prime by its restrictive racial policies. Whether intentional or unintentional, as the lone golfer of African ancestry currently playing on the regular PGA Tour, Tiger Woods's recognition of these pioneering black golfers upon his first winning of golf's most coveted award represented a major statement on the status of race relations in the sport and probably contributed to efforts to stimulate involvement in golf among African American youth and other minorities.

The era of segregation is long past, and the reception of the multi-ethnic Tiger Woods as the premier professional golfer in the world is often

Golfer Tiger Woods, circa 1997.



*Photofest*

regarded as a clear indication of how much race relations in the sport have improved since the Jim Crow period. However, as the only black golfer on the regular PGA Tour in the early twenty-first century, Tiger Woods shares the role that John Shippen occupied in Jim Crow America at the beginning of the twentieth century: that of the only “colored golf pro.” Tiger Woods’s recognition of pioneering black golfers clearly identified him as part of the continuing legacy of black golfers. By linking this accomplishment to these role models of the past, he also stimulated interest in promoting more African American inclusion in the sport and bolstered programmatic efforts to introduce and stimulate interest in golf as a career pursuit among

African American youth. More importantly, however, is the enthusiasm that Woods's achievements have generated among members of the generation of segregation era black golfers, such as Charlie Sifford, Pete Brown, and Lee Elder, who have lived to witness first-hand a continuation of the legacy of African Americans in golf.<sup>20</sup>

### RECOGNITION OF CHARLIE SIFFORD BY GOLF'S ESTABLISHMENT

Perhaps the most important step toward recognition of the legacy of African American participation in golf occurred in 2004, when golf's most esteemed organization, the World Golf Hall of Fame, voted to induct Charlie Sifford as its first African American member.<sup>21</sup> Sifford, who forty years earlier had become the first African American to be granted full PGA membership, was being accorded a similarly pioneering honor. Because the World Golf Hall of Fame had recently expanded its eligibility criteria for induction to include the category of lifetime achievement, Sifford's induction did not involve the need to establish new induction avenue criteria. Although Charlie Sifford is well-deserving of this honor, his induction can also be viewed in the larger context of the need to recognize African American golfers of the distant past while stimulating greater involvement of African American youth in the sport today. Sifford noted in his induction ceremony reception speech that he hoped that he would not be the only black golfer from the past to receive this honor.<sup>22</sup> Because aggressive efforts have been recently mounted to increase the participation of black youth and other minorities in the sport, the honor accorded Sifford by the World Golf Hall of Fame can further contribute to these efforts. More specifically, Sifford's induction should represent

1. The beginning of the recognition of achievements by deserving black golfers who competed as professionals before 1961, when it was not possible for them to become PGA members
2. The cornerstone of a formalized program to build a sense of pride among aspiring black youths who will be able to identify with golfers of the past who were successful players despite obstacles
3. The basis for developing an educational mural at the World Golf Village in St. Augustine, Florida, site of the World Golf Hall of Fame, to acquaint the larger public with the contributions of African Americans to golf in the United States, thereby fostering greater respect
4. the beginning of the process of producing for golf the same type of monuments that have been developed to note the achievements of segregation-era African American contributors to other sports (such as baseball).<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ongoing success of Tiger Woods as the world's premier golfer also gives high visibility to an African American presence in the sport and has no doubt stimulated interest among aspiring African American youths. However, the popular belief that interest in golf among African Americans is fairly recent should be discarded. In this chapter, it has been shown that African Americans participated in golf from the earliest appearance of the sport in the United States. The lack of a significant presence today can be attributed in part to the long-held practices of institutionalized discrimination in golf, which, until more recent times, characterized the experiences of blacks who held aspirations of playing golf as a serious career pursuit. In response to racial discrimination, African Americans developed their own golfing activities, including organizations, tournaments, and star performers who rose from the caddy ranks to the status of recognized golf professionals in black communities throughout America. Because black golfers of past generations have been ignored, underemphasized, or represented in inaccurate ways, it is important that future efforts to set the historical record straight be mounted to provide accounts of their experiences more detailed than the limited information currently available. It is to be hoped that this brief chapter can stimulate further inquiry by both scholars and sport enthusiasts. Caution must be exercised to provide accurate portrayals of their experiences rather than exaggerated, glorified, and equally inaccurate accounts of their activities. Although emphasis in this chapter has focused on African American golfers of the pre-Civil Rights period, in light of the absence of information about their activities, it is also important to document and chronicle on a first-hand basis the experiences of the post-Civil Rights, or "modern," professional African American golfers. This is especially needed in order to provide a sense of historical perspective for the generation of African American youths who will aspire to and pursue professional golf as a career during the twenty-first century and the years beyond.

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# African Americans and Sports Television: Symbols and Signs, Dollars, Decay, and Dysfunctionality

*David J. Leonard*

In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos seized upon the platform of the Mexico City Olympics to protest the racialized violence and despair that plagued people of color around the globe. Donning beads to memorialize the many African Americans who had lost their lives because of slavery and Jim Crow and white supremacist practices, Smith and Carlos raised their fists in solidarity with those struggling for basic human rights around the globe. “We wanted the world to know that in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, South Central Los Angeles, Chicago, people were still walking back and forth in poverty without even the necessary clothes to live,” Carlos argued thirty-five years after the protest. “We have kids that don’t have shoes even today. It’s not like the powers that be can’t provide these things. They can send a space ship to the moon, or send a probe to Mars, yet they can’t give shoes? They can’t give health care? I’m just not naïve enough to accept that.”<sup>1</sup> The impact of the protest rests not simply with their ability to use the Olympic platform, which Harry Edwards later described as “second only to the United Nations as an international political forum,” but because of the power that their bowed heads and raised fists symbolized when projected globally through the (Olympic) television.<sup>2</sup> “Television had been integral to the rise of black fortunes in and outside of the sports arena. It had brought the Civil Rights movement onto center stage and into the living rooms of America, in the process exposing the scope and depth of racist discrimination in America.”<sup>3</sup> The politics of the Olympics coupled with the spotlight enabled by television provided Smith, Carlos, Muhammad Ali, and countless other black athletes with a platform to give voice to those without voices—to make visible the pain and suffering that had long been

ignored inside the United States. "Television, to no small degree, legitimized and made celebrities of the movement's leadership through its coverage of the causes they represented and the issues they so forcefully articulated."<sup>4</sup> It afforded black athletes a certain amount of power to expose the racism that existed for people of color—athletes of color included—who were often erased from dominant media coverage. Importantly, the nightly prime-time broadcasts reached roughly four hundred million people worldwide.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, television not only provided black athletes with a political platform resulting from their increased celebrity and visibility as leaders inside and outside the black community but also contributed to a certain amount of financial security and prowess. "In sport, however, there was a major and seminal difference relative to the impact of television on black fortunes. Heightened and expanding television exposure for black athletes, and the financial opportunities this created for them, elevated these athletes in both visibility and celebrity. In consequence there developed a burgeoning gap between the circumstances of the black athlete and black people more generally."<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, television coverage and the embarrassment that beset the U.S. Olympic Committee and the entire nation given the global television coverage contributed to a systematic backlash against Smith and Carlos. The U.S. Olympic Committee quickly sent the gold and bronze medalists home, stripping them of their medals. The demonization of Smith and Carlos, similar to the opposition that Muhammad Ali faced throughout his career, demonstrates the contradictory or precarious relationship that black athletes had with American sports television. Brent Musberger, who ultimately would make a career out of "describing" the athletic accomplishments of black athletes as a CBS basketball commentator, excoriated the protest as a "juvenile gesture [by those] who should have known better."<sup>7</sup> As noted by Edwards, television also heightened divisions between black athletes and the broader community, all the while subjecting the modern black athlete to the greater scrutiny, demonization, and discipline required by white America. Most importantly, as evident here, television came to represent a cultural (racialized/gendered) space in which black athletes could be celebrated and commodified, vilified and condemned. Ali's weekly appearances with Howard Cosell embodied this complex relationship in that this presence generated interest and ratings but also fueled opposition and backlash against the heavyweight champion. Charismatic and dominating, yet brash and unflinching in his opposition to American racism, Ali became a black man who much of America loved to hate during the 1960s and 1970s, but his charm, his talents, and the spectacle that often was Ali made him an attractive commodity for the American sports establishment. He was both a problem and the best thing to happen to Amer-

ican sports, demonstrating the contradictory place of black athletes within American sports culture.

Thirty-seven years after the Mexico City protest, on November 15, 2004, the National Football League, ABC, and its advertising partners faced another controversy, stuck in the midst of America's culture war. On the heels of the 2004 Super Bowl "wardrobe malfunction" involving Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake,<sup>8</sup> the airing of a Monday Night Football promotional skit involving the Philadelphia Eagle's Terrell Owens and *Desperate Housewives*'s Nicolette Sheridan prompted much public debate and rancor. The skit, which contained an eventually naked Sheridan seducing Owens as he prepared for a prime-time game against the Dallas Cowboys, resulted in a ubiquitous public outrage and condemnation, 50,000 complaints to the FCC, and an avalanche of media posturing. Mark Anthony Neal describes the skit and fallout as not only evidence of the persistent significance of race within American sports television, but the place of minstrelsy within this venue:

So yeah maybe Sambo did die, but there's been a resurrection—one worthy of a billion dollar industry—and the opening segment of last week's *Monday Night Football* broadcast, the Vibe Awards ceremony that was broadcast the following night and the closing minutes ESPN's Friday night NBA game between the Detroit Pistons and the Indiana Pacers were proof that Sambo and the minstrel stage that so powerfully nurtured his existence are still alive and well and whetting the appetites of those desiring the "real nigger show." . . . No doubt for ABC, it was entirely bankable that the interests of Monday Night Football's largely male audience would be piqued when a nearly nude Nicolette Sheridan showed up on their screen. That Terrell Owens was the object of her affection was both revolutionary and thoughtless (somewhat akin to believing that the majority of white men who watch porn really want to watch black men have sex with white women)—the product of insatiable desires to sell anything at any cost. . . . The reality though is that it *was* Terrell Owens, who along with Ron Artest, is the poster-child for the "don't-give-a-fuck" black male athlete. Anyone who suggests that there aren't clear racist overtones to criticisms of the Owens-Sheridan spot should get themselves a copy of Geoffrey C. Ward's *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. Somewhere Johnson, who was a champion heavyweight boxer in the early 20th century and who enjoyed flaunting his relationships with white women, is dancing a jig.<sup>9</sup>

As noted by Neal, the place of black athletes within contemporary sports television maintains a tradition of minstrelsy and the overall ridicule and

demonization that African Americans face within American sports culture. Similarly, the level of outrage and ample coverage afforded to the brawl that took place in 2005 between members of the Indiana Pacers and the Detroit Pistons and numerous Detroit fans embodies not only the ways in which black athletic bodies not only dominate contemporary sports television, but also how their presence is overdetermined by a discourse of demonization, criminalization, and commodification.<sup>10</sup> In total, these representations, from the coverage in 1968 to that in 2005, reflects a cultural racism that simultaneously offers “patronizing and demeaning representations of African-American Otherness.”<sup>11</sup> The practice of broadcasting and selling what is imagined as a dysfunctional, contemptible, and threatening black athletic identity is commonplace and has been most evidenced recently with the daily coverage of Terrell Owens. His longstanding battles with the Philadelphia Eagles, his banishment from Eagles training camp in 2005 that concluded with him working out in his driveway in front of numerous cameras, the daily reports from Dallas Cowboys training camp about whether he and coach Bill Parcells were getting along, the game shots that appear on television as commentators question whether or not he is giving one hundred percent, and his accidental drug overdose reveal the level of scrutiny that contemporary black athletes (particularly outspoken stars) face within contemporary media culture.<sup>12</sup> Read against the daily reports about Kobe Bryant, Barry Bonds, and countless others, whether in the coverage of on-the-field indiscretions or criminal misconduct off-the-field, the hypercoverage of Owens reflects a broader place of black athletes within contemporary sports television.

Yet this is neither a new history nor a simple history in that just as athletes of years past found a place on television screens throughout the world as symbols of American dominance, signs of colorblindness, and dollar signs, today’s athletes—even those most condemned and demonized—simultaneously function as powerful commodities. This chapter thus examines the broader history of commodification and celebration, demonization, criminalization, and control within sports television, arguing that the history of the black athlete is one of contradictions: visibility and invisibility; popularity and unpopularity; promise and false hope; the American Dream and persistent nightmare. Each of these already-mentioned examples, especially interpreted within a broader context, embody the meaning and place of the black athlete within American sports television history: as dollar signs and sources of profit; as object of gaze and celebration; as source of panic and condemnation; as symbols of cultural depravity and the criminality; and of American racial progress and the American Dream. From Mean Joe Green and O. J. Simpson to MJ, Tiger, King James, ’Melo, D-Wade, KB24, “The Answer,” and KG<sup>13</sup> to John Carlos, Tommy Smith, and Jim Brown, sports television has served as a contested space of meaning in which the

bodies of black athletes have been put on display, serving as objects of commodification or derision as their place within a broader sports and societal context is questioned and surveilled by fictionalized television shows and real-life sports television commentaries.

## BLACK ATHLETES AND FICTIONALIZED TELEVISION

Integration brought about significant change in America even without equality and full citizenship for communities of color. Within the realm of sports, integration increased visibility and enhanced opportunities for elite black athletes. William Rhoden, in *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, describes the last thirty years of black sports participation as unprecedented: "Black athletes are running faster and jumping higher than ever before. They earn more money in one season than their predecessors earned during their entire careers. Such contemporary African American athletes as LeBron James, Michel Vick, and Tiger Woods are worshiped almost as gods. At a time when the number of black males attending college is increasing at a slower rate than the number being incarcerated, young black men with stellar athletic ability are still hotly perused, coddled, and showered with gifts for a promise to attend major colleges and universities."<sup>14</sup> Amy Bass likewise sees sports as a place of visibility and contestation for today's black superstars, centering the cultural, ideological, and political context and meaning of the golden age of black athletics. "The black athlete serves as one of *the most visible integrated* [her emphasis] racial subjects in modern society, seen in all facets of media, cheered by millions of fans, teamed with white counterparts, and, at least on the surface, accepted."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the arrival of "the golden age of black athletes,"<sup>16</sup> which resulted from integration of sports at the collegiate and professional levels, did not merely reflect the successes of black athletes within the football, basketball, baseball, track, and even tennis ranks, but through the newly minted black athlete as celebrity.

The dawn of this new era of the black athlete as celebrity, icon, and commodity had as much to do with visibility and successes on television as it did with dominance on the field. For example, although certainly a development of on-the-field successes, the popularity of black athletes stemmed from the visibility that resulted from their presence in American popular television culture. For example, throughout the 1970s, black athletes made appearances on a spectrum of prime-time television shows.<sup>17</sup> Roosevelt Grier, an all-pro defensive lineman with the Los Angeles Rams, appeared on *I Dream of Jeannie* (1968), *Kojak* (1976), *CHiPs* (1977), *Quincy M.E.* (1978), *The Love Boat* (1979), *Roots: The Next Generation* (1979), and *The White Shadow* (1981), as well as several television films. He was not alone: Muhammad Ali appeared on the *Flip Wilson Show* (1971), *Diff'rent Strokes* (1979), and

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*The White Shadow*, 1978–1981. Shown: (front) Thomas Carter, Ira Angustain, Byron Stewart, Ken Howard, Nathan Cook, Kevin Hooks, (back) Eric Kilpatrick, Timothy Van Patten, Ken Michelman.



20th Century Fox/Photofest

*Vega\$* (1979); Reggie Jackson guest-starred on *The Love Boat* (1979), *Archie Bunker's Place* (1982), and *The Jeffersons* (1985); Henry Aaron appeared on *Happy Days* (1980); George Foreman appeared on *Sanford and Son* (1976); and Rafer Johnson appeared in *Mission Impossible* (1971), *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1975), and *Roots: The Next Generation* (1979). Guest appearances

proved popular in the 1970s, not just for athletes but for black actors in general, as television executives sought to diversify its shows, although in ways that did not alienate potential viewers. Black athletes, already acceptable and desirable within white households, became a safe mechanism for television to blacken America's small screen. This was done not simply through the incorporation of safe (not political and not overly black) athletes as guest stars, but also through the production of bio-pictures. For example, *Brian's Song* first aired in 1971 on ABC amid the black power movement and increasing tensions between blacks and whites in America. It chronicles the story of Brian Piccolo (James Caan), a white all-American football star at Wake Forest who, despite twice leading the nation in rushing, was not drafted when scouts concluded that he lacked the necessary strength and speed to compete in the professional ranks. Overcoming great obstacles, Piccolo, through hard work and because of his perseverance, found a home with the Chicago Bears and played there four years, although never getting out of the shadow of the All-Pro running back Gail Sayers (Billy Dee Williams). The film focused on the friendship between Sayers and Piccolo, who, despite competing on the field and living amid racially hostile times, "shattered racial boundaries."<sup>18</sup> The power of their friendship, evident in their cross-racial bond, was central to the film's narrative, especially in light of Piccolo's untimely death of cancer. Still regarded by many critics as one of the greatest sports films of all time, the significance of this film rests on its celebration of sport as a space of color-blindness where black and white become meaningless as teammates fight, love, and struggle against opponents both on and off the field. Equally important, films such as *Brian's Song* and *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1974) served as an ideological and cultural response to ongoing questions about American race relations. These films construct an America where racism and racial tensions have the potential to become secondary as black and white athletes lead America into a new era. Moreover, these films sought to place the tensions and animosity of the 1960s in the past, elucidating racial progress and illustrating the power of sports in allowing African Americans to secure the American Dream and facilitate America's greatness. These films established sports as a powerful televisional and cinematic vehicle for American racial discourse.

The 1970s also saw the popularity of ABC's *Superstars*, which brought together athletes from a spectrum of sports to battle one another in a series of athletic competitions, including various running events, swimming, wrestling, and the famed obstacle course. *Superstars* further pushed black athletes into the public imagination, often showing a more personal and up-close side of these athletes. For example, in 1973, heavyweight boxer Joe Frazier became a household name virtually overnight after he almost drowned while competing in the 50-meter swimming competition.

Although unable to swim, Frazier told a reporter who asked him why he competed in the race, “How was I to know I couldn’t unless I tried it?” Showing his competitive spirit, vulnerability, and everyday man’s humanity (just because he was a world-class boxer did not mean he did not struggle in life), *Superstars* put black athletes in a different light (and capitalized on this new light with good ratings). Equally significant, *Superstars* further solidified in the white imagination the athletic prowess and physical dominance of black athletes. For example, the successes of Renaldo Nehemiah, Willie Gault, and Hershel Walker on the show, especially with their ability to virtually hurdle the climbing wall and high bar on the obstacle course, demonstrated their immense athletic talents and supposed innate physical superiority.<sup>19</sup> Just like increasingly popular televised sports, shows such as *Superstars* put the athletic skills and talents of black athletes into a national spotlight that in some ways reinforced dominant stereotypes about black bodies.

The increasing popularity of sports television was not limited to real-life competitions but was also evident in the popularity of *The White Shadow*, a CBS drama that aired from 1978 until 1981. The first ensemble drama to have a predominantly African American cast (not coincidentally focusing on a sports world) and to date the second-longest-running drama to have an overwhelmingly African American cast, *The White Shadow* chronicled the coaching life of Ken Reeves (Ken Howard), a white, ex-NBA-player turned high school coach. Reeves, who coached at Carver High School, a predominantly black high school in South Central, Los Angeles, not only led his team to great on-the-court success during the show’s three seasons but was shown as a father figure to many of his players. He taught them how to be men and how to survive the difficulties of an impoverished, violent, and despair-ridden South Central, Los Angeles, illustrating once again that sports can foster interracial harmony by teaching, disciplining, and otherwise bringing together blacks and whites. Although short-lived, the relative success of *The White Shadow* further propelled black athletes and sports in general into American popular television.

This moment also witnessed the increasing popularity of professional basketball, and sports in general, as advertisers and the networks found “a steady revenue stream” through the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Still less popular on television than baseball and football, the popularity of basketball on television increased dramatically with the entry of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird into the NBA in 1980. In 1979, Magic Johnson, a dynamic point guard from Michigan State University, squared off against America’s “great white hope,” Indiana State’s Larry Bird, in the NCAA National Basketball Championship. As the most watched college game in history, the artistry and talents of Johnson and Bird, and, more importantly, their budding rivalry, not only revolutionized basketball but changed its cultural, aesthetic,



political, and racial presence, propelling this newly black-dominated sport into the forefront of American sports television. "The presence of Earvin 'Magic' Johnson of the Los Angeles Lakers, and Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics, would mark another in a long line of sports episodes involving mythical battles over racial superiority," writes Todd Boyd in *Young, Black, Rich and Famous*. "As it played out in the NBA with Magic and Bird, it offered us a prolonged series of events that would forever change the way we think about basketball."<sup>21</sup> To Boyd, the historic convergence of Bird and Magic, at a moment in which sports television was gaining popularity and when America continued to struggle over its national identity in a post-Civil Rights era, the epic battles between Magic and Bird became must-see television as fans across the country rooted on not only their teams to victory, but their respective racialized communities toward dominance:

Ultimately, this competition between the two went well beyond the basketball court. Indeed, my interest in the two transcended the actual games themselves. The on-court battles were simply the top of the iceberg. It is the entire era and all of its racial images that makes this contrast so interesting. Magic, Bird, Reagan, Los Angeles, Boston, and the overall representation of race in popular culture from the '80s was very much like a well-written script that included all of the proper elements for an edge-of-your seat thriller. In the end, Magic and Bird were simply vessels who helped bring society's confrontational attitudes about race out into the open, while making them somewhat more palatable because the issues were being presented [in] basketball.<sup>22</sup>

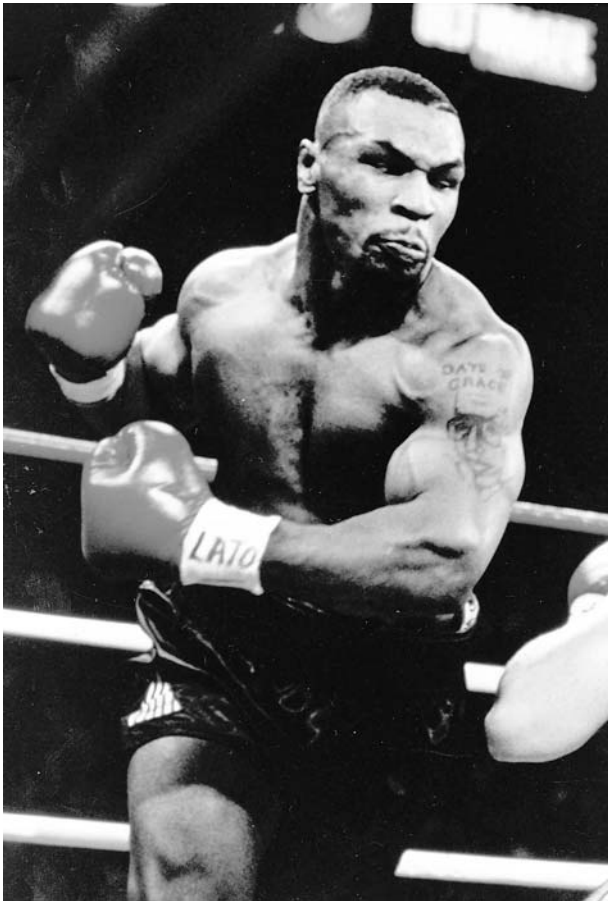
Magic and Bird (and eventually Michael Jordan) proved to be valuable commodities, resulting in commercials and appearances on numerous shows, growing ratings for basketball, and expanding presence within television culture, whether on the court or in a spectrum of television shows. The popularity and financial possibilities made evident by Johnson and Jordan did not merely transform the financial and cultural presence of basketball and its players within American (and eventually global) television culture but also proved equally important in elevating the value and visibility of black athletes across other sports. Yet, visibility and value have not existed or resulted in an elimination of racial discourses, despite claims to the contrary. Black athletes have remained fixtures on American televisions as athletes, performers, commodities, and free-floating signs subject to societal condemnation, derision, stereotypes, and demonization. The persistence of commodification and demonization within television sports culture is embodied by ESPN's football drama *Playmakers*.

**PLAYMAKERS<sup>23</sup>**

Following in the tradition of HBO's *First and Ten*, a show that used the freedoms provided by cable television to expose the underbelly of professional football, ESPN launched *Playmakers* in 2004.

Despite a marketing strategy that emphasized the behind-the-scenes realism (its Web site describes the show as "scripted with unsentimental compassion")<sup>24</sup> and its promotion as that of a show that would tell what the NFL doesn't want fans to hear, *Playmakers* gained popularity not simply through its efforts to commodify a sensationalized sports world but because of its acceptance and deployment of hegemonic racist and misogynist stereotypes that surround today's sports. Its attempts to go "beyond the

**Mike Tyson, circa 1990s.**



*Photofest*

glory" articulate (and deploy) U.S. cultural anxieties surrounding black bodies, all the while promulgating nostalgia for a (mythic) sports world based in character and community: that is, an era when sports was still a bastion of white males. *Playmakers* thus reflects the widespread demonization and commodification of black athletes within sports television. "The body of the African-American athlete, as a site and source of (exceptional) ability, (criminal) deviance, and (spectatorial, if not sexual) pleasure, simultaneously facilitates imagination and exploitation," write C. Richard King and Charles Springwood. "And as it entertains, inspires, troubles, and revolts, it legitimates, if not encourages, discipline, regulation and control."<sup>25</sup> In other words, *Playmakers*, in the tradition of *First and Ten*, and like *Outside the Lines* and *Beyond the Glory*, simultaneously profits off the spectacle and danger of black athletic bodies, seeking profits and discipline from the commodity and spectatorial control of the modern black athlete.

Following the players on game day (with a clock counting down minutes to kickoff), the pilot introduces Demetrius Harris (Omar Gooding), the cocky and talented running back who is more concerned with satisfying his drug habit, sexual needs, and ego than with supporting his teammates or the game (stereotype #1). His rival for the position is veteran Leon Taylor (Russell Hornsby), who tore up his knee during the previous season. Now losing his job to Harris, he struggles to return to his old form. As the show progresses he becomes bitter and narcissistic (stereotype #2). Throughout the show's first episode, Taylor confides in Eric Olczyk (Jason Matthew Smith), a linebacker haunted by his brother's death during a high school football game, about a recent collision that left an opponent paralyzed, as well as about fears for his own future. The mistreatment of Olczyk (and Taylor to a lesser degree) embodies the problems of contemporary sport: their loyalty and hard work are not rewarded, but arrogant hoodlums make millions.

But *Playmakers* is not just about players' relationships, generational tensions, or even the struggling Cougars. It is a glimpse at everything we supposedly hate about modern-day sports: greedy athletes (and their lack of respect for the game and lack of personal responsibility) and the cutthroat business practices of our favorite teams—as well as drugs, criminality, and adultery. *Playmakers* imagines these problems, the vices and dysfunctionality of contemporary sports, mostly through its black male characters, thereby exploiting the dominant racialized mythologies surrounding sports. It, like Budweiser's Leon commercials (an obvious homage to Terrell Owens) articulates common-sense understandings of contemporary black athletes, ridiculing and exposing them while profiting from them and from the assumptions of its customers. Dave Zirin positions this commercial within a broader history of commodity racism in which corporate interest sells and pimps racist representations: "So who is 'Leon'? 'Leon' is

corporate America's gob of spit in the face of modern Black athletes and anti-heroes. They are striking not only the players themselves, but also us—the fans—for embracing them. We shouldn't accept that. Let's load 'Leon' on a bus with Stepin Fetchit, Mammy, Charlie Chan, and that damn Taco Bell Chihuahua—and push it off the pop culture cliff. Until 'Leon' goes, Guinness will suit me just fine."<sup>26</sup>

To this end, *Playmakers* repeatedly deploys stereotypes, alongside a trendy documentary style (quick cuts, voice-overs, blackout transitions) that appears to legitimize its sensationalized account of contemporary football. Visual choices within the show's pilot repeatedly fetishize black bodies: the Cougars' pre-game ritual includes three half-naked black men singing the Notre Dame "Fight Song" at the request of a white teammate while the camera gaze focuses our attention on their bare black buttocks. Black players' bodies are the basis of their professional achievements; although both Harris and Taylor succeed on the field because of their talents, the "crafty," intelligent—and white—Olczyk is good because of his hard work.

Harris, by contrast, is a drug-addicted, violent, and hypersexual black athlete. In the show's first episode, he arrives ninety minutes before kick-off after a night of intense partying (which included an interracial threesome). As Coach George (Tony Denison) lectures the team about personal responsibility and commitment, Taylor (not at the meeting because he's been stopped for a traffic violation) tells his lineman buddy Buffalo (Marcello Thedford), "When you're a playmaker, rules don't apply." When Buffalo does arrive at the locker room—extremely late—he's suspended; at this news, he destroys the locker room. Incredibly, Harris—the star running back whom the owner wants on the field at any cost—is allowed to play when he arrives even later (literally minutes before kickoff), having stopped off to see his drug dealer for a panic-induced pre-game fix.

Beyond reinscribing hegemonic understanding of innate (genetic) black athletic superiority (versus the dedication and hard work of white athletes), the show solidifies the image of the selfish, drug-using, materialistic, and criminally prone black athlete.<sup>27</sup> In another episode ("Talk Radio," Episode 7), *Playmakers* chronicles Leon Taylor's brush with the law with his arrest for spousal abuse; in "The Choice," Demetrius is questioned by the police after his friend, Cal, is arrested after a shooting outside of the club, forcing him to choose between his loyalty to his "posse" or his future (and the truth). The constant redeployment of dominant representations of black athletes as criminally minded, out of control, and otherwise immoral permeates the stereotypical representations of black athletes within contemporary sports television (both fictionalized and "real-life").

Recapitulating hegemonic sports coverage, *Playmakers* deviates from much of the history of African American athletes on sports television,

which has seen the celebration and commodification of those athletes, from O. J. Simpson and Magic Johnson to Michael Jordan and LeBron James—each “portrayed as the moral obverse of the masses of African Americans vilified by the New Right for allegedly lacking the (new) right stuff.”<sup>28</sup> Jordan was imagined (with the assistance of his marketing team) as colorless, as no longer black, as “different because he is a celebrity,” and, most important, as “an enshrined all-American icon.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, *Playmakers* gives voice to longstanding racial fictions regarding black physicality and criminality, taken to an extreme and pathological level given the wealth and the supposed indulged experiences of today’s black athletes. Mirroring much of popular culture, especially hegemonic sports discourses, *Playmakers* reinforces the process that had led “black men” to “become the face of menace in America.”<sup>30</sup> Unlike Jordan, Tiger, D-Wade, or LeBron, each in their own way having become a “breath of fresh air,” those black football players represented within *Playmakers* embody the stereotypical “trash-talking, spit-hurling, head-butting [black] sports millionaires.”<sup>31</sup>

Joy James argues that “[b]lackness has come to represent sex and violence in the national psyche. Although they gain notoriety as the most infamous perpetrators of unrestrained criminality, African Americans are given little resignation in media, crime reports or social crusades as being victims.”<sup>32</sup> Herman Gray and Todd Boyd argue that beginning in the 1980s, amid an era of deindustrialization, shrinking social services, and the Reagan revolution, black athletes were swept up by a political and cultural current that played on historic ideologies and tropes.<sup>33</sup> “Often projected as murderous criminals on the nightly news, in popular films, and in society as a whole, Black men were without a doubt public enemy number one. . . . So, for this reason, many Black men who were interested in making it in the hostile war world of America would smile so as to lessen the perceived threat and to make smooth their path as much as possible.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, in this fictionalized, yet supposedly true-to-life examination of football (sports; hip-hop) culture, the black men presented within a world of *Playmakers* rarely smile, being too busy demanding more money, sexually harassing sports reporters, and otherwise betraying their white fans, coaches, owners, and teammates by their drug addiction, sexual depravity, and otherwise violent behavior. In this regard, *Playmakers* caters to white anger and fears about the declining significance of whiteness within the sports arena, as well as to widely held beliefs about the declining values offered by sports to American youths. According to this argument, black “dominance” of sports (and popular culture as a whole) is not only destroying America’s pastimes but also contributing to a societal moral crisis as the basis for the important culture war. From Kobe Bryant to Barry Bonds, criminal actions, me-first attitudes, and general disrespect toward fans are leaving white children with fewer role models who look like them. The criminalization of black athletes, the

commonplace practice of pathologizing an entire generation of black youth, and the ubiquitous coverage of the criminal infractions of contemporary black athletes have found a significant venue in television.<sup>35</sup>

**“YOU CAN TAKE BLACK MAN OUT OF THE GHETTO, BUT NOT THE CRIMINAL OUT OF THE BLACK ATHLETE”<sup>36</sup>**

Although the increasing power of the Internet and the financial pressures facing American newspapers have driven the “convergence of the front and back pages,” causing hypercoverage of the criminal misconduct of collegiate and professional athletes, the hegemonic power of white supremacist discourses has also facilitated this process. In other words, the increasing visibility of black athletes within American sports and the commonplace acceptance of ideologies that construct black men as criminally prone and dangerous drives media coverage of crime and sports. Television, with the emergence of ESPN (particularly *Sportscenter*) and Fox Sports, with the arrival of shows like *Best Damn Sports Show Period*, *Jim Rome is Burning*, *Outside the Lines*, *Pardon the Interruption*, *Around the Horn*, *The Sports Reporters*, *Costas Now*, *Real Sports*, *Beyond the Glory*, and countless others, has proved to be a powerful venue in which to give voice to “the problem” of crime and sports.

*Sportscenter* reports, breaking news on ESPN, and debates on any number of sports talk (debate) shows all contribute to the illusion that crime in sports is not only a problem but a problem that is both epidemic and a threat to the national fabric.<sup>37</sup> For example, the television media in 2006 spent ample airtime reporting about the recent “crime wave” involving the Cincinnati Bengals; in December 2006, *Outside the Lines* reported on the arrest of Tank Johnson and also debated the issue of guns and athletes using the October 2006 arrest of Stephen Jackson for one felony count of criminal recklessness and misdemeanor counts of battery and disorderly conduct after an altercation outside an Indianapolis strip club. The arrests of Jayson Williams,<sup>38</sup> Kobe Bryant,<sup>39</sup> Koren Robinson,<sup>40</sup> Steven Jackson, Eddie Griffin,<sup>41</sup> Ruben Patterson,<sup>42</sup> Pacman Jones,<sup>43</sup> Terence Kiel,<sup>44</sup> Damon Stoudamire,<sup>45</sup> Jason Kidd,<sup>46</sup> Tank Johnson, and countless others, including accusations of steroids abuse by Barry Bonds and the alleged suicide attempt of Terrell Owens, have all received ample television media coverage.<sup>47</sup> Gregory Moore, in “Many of our Black Athletes are Going Backwards; Not Forward,” captures the nature of this panic and, more importantly, the cultural fixation on the criminal misconduct (and accusations of such) of black athletes: “We have more Black athletes taking ten steps backwards than forwards because of their indiscretions and misjudgments.”<sup>48</sup> The media, including sports television, contribute to these processes of criminalization by focusing on crime among athletes and by

giving the impression that most athletes are engaged in criminal behavior. According to Tom Sanders, vice president for Player Programs in the NBA, "Everyone feels that athletes have to take the good with the bad, the glory with the negative publicity. However, no one appreciates the broad-brush application that is applied in so many instances. Of the few thousand that play sport on the highest level, if four or five individuals in each sport—particularly if they are black—have problems with the law, people won't have long to wait before some media people are talking about all those athletes."<sup>49</sup> Replicating societal panics and the criminalization of young black men, and paired with ubiquitous debates about the effects of black youth culture on broader society, such reports have fueled mythology surrounding athletes and crimes.

Although nothing new, the power of television, particularly sports television, in light of the celebrity, success, financial presence, and imagined achievement of the American Dream via sports, is evident in the construction of black male athletes as deviant, criminal, and threatening. According to David Andrews, blackness, particularly that associated with athletic male bodies, represents a sign of decay, disorder, and danger.<sup>50</sup> Herman Gray concurs, noting that "[t]he black other occupies a complex site, a place where fears, desires, and repressed dreams are lodged. The black other is a site of spectacle, in which whites imagine blackness as a potential measure of evil and menace."<sup>51</sup> The endless coverage of black athletes engaged in criminal behavior, read against a backdrop of shows such as *Cops*, *Law and Order*, *CSI*, and *Oz*; the demonization of hip-hop; and a nightly news coverage that regularly reports on the criminal misconduct of black youth transcends a discourse that individualizes criminal activity but presumes that "these innately physical males (black athletes) would be misbehaving" without sports—without the interventions and disciplinary oversight of white coaches, fans, and owners.<sup>52</sup> Henry Giroux further clarifies the centrality of black criminality discourses within white supremacy when he writes: "In this racism, the other's identity warrants its very annihilation because it is seen as impure, evil, and inferior. Moreover, whiteness represents itself as a universal marker for being civilized and in doing so posits the Other within the language of pathology, fear, madness, and degeneration."<sup>53</sup>

Criminalization reflects the process of extending criminal meaning to a previously legally unclassified social practice, body, or group. Similar to the process of constructing racialized bodies, criminalization is a historically specific, ideological process that mediates competing political projects. Not only in terms of the ubiquity and the ease in which information now reaches people's homes, twenty-four-hour sports television, and fears about how fan perceptions of black athletes will affect business, has concretized black athletes as signifiers of crime and decay. Angela Davis, writing

on the prison–industrial complex, notes that the “fear of crime has attained a status that bears a sinister similarity to the fear of communism . . . during the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>54</sup> Television culture, particularly sports television media, has thus been central to this process, not only in focusing ample time on the supposed crime problem of sports but also in deploying widely tropes and ideologies as explanations for why these one-time heroes threw their lives away because of poor choices. The criminalization of black youths through both the criminal justice system and sports media has confined an entire generation of black youth to the role of criminals within the white popular imagination. The lurking black male represents the ideologized body that lays the foundation and evidence for greater state power and surveillance.<sup>55</sup> Whether on the court or in the street, black male bodies require containment and control. Whether manifesting the hyper (and disproportionate) focus on the epidemic of crime within sports from ESPN, Fox News, *Cops*, or the political pulpit, sports television contributes to a white imagination that locates crime in the bodies of young black males, simultaneously exonerating whiteness of all societal transgressions.

For example, the arrest (and pre-trial activities) of Kobe Bryant in 2003 provoked twenty-four hour, multiple channel coverage that not only documented the alleged rape and legal maneuvering but also situated the accusation within Kobe Bryant’s life story. The rape allegations provided the impetus for stories and articles about his sometimes selfish on-the-court behavior, his idiosyncrasies, and his tendency to disengage with teammates as somehow providing a cue as to why he may have committed such a heinous crime. These explanatory factors serve not to explain the accusation but to pathologize Kobe as another ungrateful (black) athlete.<sup>56</sup> Worse, the media habitually contextualizes the alleged criminal acts of black athletes as part of a larger pattern of misbehavior. The arrests of Daryl Strawberry or the man-hunt of Dwight Gooden—both on drug charges—over the last two decades, resulted in “breaking news” coverage, but similar circumstances involving white athletes resulted in nonstories, sympathetic treatment, and an overall kid-glove treatment. Beyond spending countless hours documenting the “criminal element,” or the “criminal problem” of contemporary sports, television has also contributed to so coloring crime in sports by giving voice and exoneration to those white athletes with checkered pasts. Whereas the stories of black athletes reflect a broader pattern and problem inside and beyond sports, the arrest, conviction, and incarceration of white athletes is imagined as an aberration of sorts, thus requiring explanation through the presentation of heart-warming personal interest stories. In fall 2006, *Outside the Lines* did a story on Jeff Reardon, arrested for robbing a jewelry store in 2005, that focused on his bouts with depression, the death of his child, and the despair (and



medication) that led him to rob a jewelry store. Similarly, HBO's *Real Sports* produced two similar pieces, documenting the tormenting struggles of drug addiction for Josh Hamilton of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays (August 15, 2006) and Jason Peter, a former linemen with the Carolina Panthers (October 30, 2006). In both cases, the stories focused on the human side of the tragedy, eliciting sympathy for their bouts with drug addiction. Viewers were left with a clear conclusion: these men are not criminals but men driven by the pressures of sport, family, and success to drug abuse and related criminal activity. Prison is no place for them; they can be helped: the pain and suffering that has besieged them and their families is punishment enough.

John Hoberman, with *Darwin's Athletes*, aptly notes the interchangeable nature of the criminal and the athlete within the white popular imagination, a discourse and trope fueled by television culture, especially in light of its tendency to give voice to the sensational and violent and to the misfortunes of black athletes. "The black male style has become incarnated in the fusion of black athletes, rappers, and criminals into a single menacing figure who disgusts and offends many blacks as well as whites."<sup>57</sup> In recent years, television—and sports culture in general—has systematically blurred the lines between "athlete, the gangster rapper, and the criminal into a single black male persona that the sports industry, the music industry, and the advertising industry have made into the predominant image of black masculinity."<sup>58</sup> The televisual representations of black athletes reduces them to criminals who have betrayed their talent, the gifts of the American Dream, and the fans themselves, contributing a hegemonic project that imagines black athletes and black criminals as equally "pathologically deficient individuals."<sup>59</sup> For example, in exploring the coverage and trial of Mike Tyson, John Sloop argues that both his athleticism and blackness (each connected to his criminality) served as the basis of explanations why he raped Desiree Washington. "The Mike Tyson that emerges from this axis works to create and/or reinforce the assumption that Tyson's behavior, based on race, class and career, is likely to lead to dangerous and violent relations."<sup>60</sup> In the media's coverage and the prosecution's case, Mike Tyson was guilty of his blackness and because he was "trained to be a pit-bull" who, if left uncontrolled, would likely transgress social/cultural boundaries as well as legal mandates. Sports television, thus, represents a powerful venue for constructing ideologies that demonize blackness as predatorial, dangerous, and hypersexual. Describing both media coverage and the statements of the prosecutors, Sloop argues, "Tied together with the image of inarticulate predator, Tyson fits comfortably in the cultural stereotype of the sexually insatiable black with an appetite that demands attention at any cost."<sup>61</sup> The fear of black athletes—those who symbolized not only an American Dream, with so little to begin with and so much to lose, but also white

acceptance of blackness—rejecting their beautiful life for a sake of crime, propelled the heightened television media coverage of Tyson, O. J. Simpson, and Kobe Bryant.

Such is the power of the media to define and redefine images that even the greatest black icons and spectacles can be denigrated to embody negative connotations. As Michael Jackson, O. J. Simpson, and Mike Tyson each discovered, those who live by the media can die by the media, and overnight, positive representations and signification can become negative. Media culture is only too happy to use black figures to represent transgressive behavior and to project society's sins onto black figures. Indeed, despite the endemic problem of sexual harassment, Clarence Thomas is the representative victim of this transgression; even though the troubling problem of child molestation cuts across every race and class, Michael Jackson is the media figure who represented this inequity; despite an epidemic of violence against women, O. J. Simpson is the ultimate wife abuser; even though date rape is a deplorable, frequent, and well-documented phenomena, it was Mike Tyson who became "poster boy" for this offense.<sup>62</sup>

As evident in the media coverage of the Tyson, Simpson, and Bryant trials, sports television reflects the intersections or dialectics between classical white supremacist ideologies and those of new racism, a moment in which black bodies are constantly put under surveillance, demonized, and rendered as undesirable or profitable. More significantly, notwithstanding demonization, outrage, and condemnation, the bodies of Tyson, Simpson, and Bryant—among others—who made careers generating millions of dollars because of their athletic prowess, generated millions because of their off-the field difficulties, demonstrating the powerful ways in which a criminalized body becomes a lucrative commodity as well. In other words, their trials and the absurd level of television (and print) media coverage "generate[d] millions of dollars in profit for cable and broadcast television networks."<sup>63</sup>

Notwithstanding the widespread condemnation of black athletes that has become as commonplace as a Kobe Bryant jump shot and a Ladainian Tomlinson touchdown, black athletes continue to dominate the commercial sports marketplace. Although some<sup>64</sup> lead us to believe that the visibility and popularity of black athletes within the television sports market is evidence of racial progress and the arrival of a colorblind moment for the United States, the prominence of black athletes within commercial television reflects their place within sports culture, their value as commodities, and the systematic effort of the sporting industry to discipline and ultimately sell black bodies who are palatable to its white consumers.<sup>65</sup>

## COMMERCIALS: COMMODITY RACISM

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the face of American sports had changed dramatically. Although race remained a salient factor within American sports, the walls of Jim Crow began to partially crumble amid the Cold War, resistance movements, and the push to win and reach all potential

**O. J. Simpson is seen in this Hertz advertisement.**



*AP Photo/Hertz*

customers. S. L. Price captures the historic transformation on fields and courts across America, which Harry Edwards has described as the beginning of the “golden age of black athletics”:<sup>66</sup>

[Jackie] Robinson ushered American sports into an era of significance beyond the playing field. During the next two generations, the once monochromatic world of team sports became a paradigm of, and some a spur to, racial equality. One milestone followed another: Larry Doby broke into the American League several months after Robinson’s debut; the NBA and NFL were completely integrated; a Texas Western basketball team with an all-black starting lineup beat Adolph Rupp’s all-white Kentucky squad in the 1996 NCAA final; the same year the Boston Celtics’ Bill Russell was named the first black head coach of a professional team; the Washington Redskins’ Doug Williams in 1988 became the first black quarterback to win a super bowl. Management was still firmly white— and, regrettably remains so today— but one could argue that the playing field has become the nation’s common ground, the one highly visible stage on which blacks and whites acted out the process of learning to live, play, and fight together as peers.<sup>67</sup>

Notwithstanding changes on the field, the opportunities afforded to black athletes off the field, in terms of endorsements, remain limited. This proves especially true for those athletes, such as Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Jim Brown, or Bill Russell, whose blackness and daily challenges to white racism render them undesirable pitchmen—unacceptable commodities. The place and possibility of black athletes as salesmen, pitchmen, and commodities changed with the ascendance of O. J. Simpson on the football field and, more important, in the corporate media world. In 1975, O. J. Simpson found his way into American households with his Hertz commercials, which showed Simpson nimbly running through an airport as white onlookers cheer him on as he desperately tries to make his flight. Larry Schwartz, in “Before the Trial, Simpson Charmed America,” noted the popularity of the commercial as reflecting Simpson’s ability to offer white American a “new” and presumably different black (athletic) identity: “His Hertz commercials pictured a dapper O. J. running to catch a Hertz rent-a-car, smiling as he hurdled the airport guardrail and flashed past the cheering old lady. He was an African-American man interacting with white men and women as if this were a natural part of our society, as if other African-American athletes were not protesting the segregation that still existed.”<sup>68</sup> In many regards, O. J. Simpson and Hertz wrote the playbook for the commercialization of black athletes as sponsors or pitchmen, demonstrating the marketability of the “right” kind of black athletes under the right conditions. Writing about Michael Jordan,

whose mediated media image emerged ten years after Simpson safely navigated America's airports without threatening its white patrons, David Andrews captures the ways in which the mass culture industry has invested and scribed particular types of black identities: "Thus Jordan's carefully scripted televisual adventures on the corporate playground were designed to substantiate an all-American (which in Manning Marable's terms means white) hard bodied identity (Jeffords 1994)<sup>69</sup> which would appeal to the racially sensitive sensibilities of the American mass market."<sup>70</sup>

O. J. Simpson was not the only black athlete to emerge as a television success in the 1970s, which also included Mean Joe Green's now-famous Coke commercial. The genius and power of this commercial rests in that Green, nicknamed "Mean," embodied the stereotype of black males: angry, militant, violent, and destructive athletes. The commercial shows a battered Green hobbling off the field, only to be approached by a young white kid, who asks the obviously tired man if he needs any help. Green exhaustedly shakes his head no, although the kid, determined to help this black superstar, offers him a fresh and refreshing Coke. Green again refuses, but the kid insists, almost begging him to take it. Smiling, Green reaches out and takes the Coke from his hand, stopping only a second to say thanks before guzzling down the bottle of Coke. As Green finishes the Coke, the young boy, not expecting anything in return, begins to walk away. Fulfilled and satisfied because of the kindness of this young white kid, Green throws him his jersey, to which the kid tells this supposedly mean man, "Thanks." In a world of Coca-Cola and sports, racial boundaries are transcended as the kindness and generosity of a black man and a white kid reveal the potential and possibility of sports and drinks as vehicle of harmony and interracial growth.

The popularity and power of the O. J. Hertz commercial and Joe Green's Coke commercial, both of which continue to be well-known in the American commercial landscape, rests not simply with the stardom of athletes or the brilliance of the commercials themselves but with their ability to imagine sports as a site of the American Dream, a place in which race and racism are insignificant, where, most importantly, the signs and symbols of racial progress and colorblindness are fully evident. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw aptly connects colorblind ideologies and sports within her discussion of the O. J. Simpson murder trial: "Simpson and perhaps a few other African Americans reinforce wishful beliefs that American society has reformed, in spite of the marginalization of masses of African Americans who live lives largely separate and remote from the majority of white Americans."<sup>71</sup> Likewise, Meri Anri-Ama Danquah captures this dominant racial ethos, so crucial to understanding blackness and sports television: "White people liked O.J. They liked liking him too. Liking him proved they were not racist. O.J. redeemed them. Whites never feel that O.J. hated them. For decades, pictures showed him wide-eyed and a little open mouthed like a kid glancing up from

a birthday cake. He was race neutral, like Colin Powell."<sup>72</sup> In other words, rooting for O.J. Simpson on the field or while running through an airport, or drinking Coke to be like Mean Joe, or Gatorade just because MJ and others do, demonstrates their and our racial progress. The fact that the U.S. populace (particularly its white citizenry) could embrace black athletes, and that black athletes could function—most evidently in these commercials—as “black Horatio Alger[s]” revealed the power and appeal of a visible black athlete within sports television.<sup>73</sup>

The history of black athletes within commodity culture is as much a narrative of black athletes selling and assuming a value—given the ability to confer value upon various products—as it is a story of American racial progress. Simpson did not sell merely for Hertz, or Green for Coke, or Jordan and Tiger Woods for Nike, but in the name of a dominant narrative of racial progress that in turn made white Americans feel good about themselves and the nation as a whole. “Simpson’s crossover success offered white viewers the opportunity to sit in judgment of black manliness at the same moment when they claimed to have gotten past racial thinking.”<sup>74</sup> The efforts to produce and provide “a black version of a white cultural model, who by his very simulated existence, ensures the submergence and subversion of racial Otherness”<sup>75</sup> has not been limited to Simpson or Green but is evidenced in the marketing of a number of more recent athletes. Michael Jordan, with his relationships with McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Wheaties, Hanes, Nike, and Gatorade, embodies an effort to sell a mediated sports blackness palatable to white audiences yet clearly black enough to appeal to racially progressive sensibilities of consumers and their belief in a paradigm of racial progress. As David Faulk, Jordan’s longtime agent, noted, the marketing of Jordan has long attempted to construct Jordan as an “All-American image . . . Not Norman Rockwell values, but a modern American image.”<sup>76</sup> More significantly, Jordan “allow[s] us to believe what we wish to believe: that in this country, have-nots can still become haves; that the American dream is still working.”<sup>77</sup> The commercials of Tiger Woods have followed a similar template, simultaneously emphasizing and deemphasizing his blackness and Otherness while keeping his Americanness in a clear and unobstructed view. Shortly after he turned pro (and signed a multimillion-dollar contract with Nike), Woods was introduced to the world with the “Hello World Campaign.” This commercial, which offered various shots of him dominating the U.S. Amateur championships, had Tiger announcing his emergence (and transcendence) in the following way:

I am the only man to win three consecutive US Amateur titles.  
Hello World.

There are still courses in the US I am not allowed to play because of the color of my skin.

Hello World.

I've heard I am not ready for you.

Are you ready for me?<sup>78</sup>

At one level, his blackness is clearly on display, as is America's "racial dilemma";<sup>79</sup> yet read against the ubiquitous efforts to celebrate his multiraciality, and the commercials that followed this initial entry into the marketplace, particularly the "I am Tiger Woods" spots that positioned him as part of a legacy of white golfers, and his Oldsmobile and Nike commercials that emphasized the "everyday man" in Tiger. In these, we can see how his blackness has been mediated and lessened within commodity sports culture. As noted by C. L. Cole and David Andrews, the fabrication of Woods is part of a larger project to inscribe the "new face of America."<sup>80</sup> "The commercialized multicultural masculinity advanced through and around Woods is the latest in America's imagined realization of its ideals (agency, equality, responsibility, and freedom) and its imagined transformed sense of national self (America has become the world that came to it)."<sup>81</sup>

The push to sell a mediated and universalized blackness, evident in the history of Simpson, Woods, and Jordan, is not the only history of sports media culture; the rise of hip-hop has necessitated a movement from Madison Avenue and Hollywood into urban America in an effort to produce marketable black subjects. Whereas Simpson, Jordan, and Woods were repackaged to downplay their blackness, the recent wave of ballers have been reformulated in a way that their blackness (and hip-hop edge) is transparent and "authentic," yet still profitable. "Black faces and black bodies are used to sell everything from clothing to deodorant and soft drinks," notes William Rhoden. "Their gestures, colorful language, and overall style are used by Madison Avenue to project the feel and fashion of inner-city America to an eager global marketplace—they're the stealth ambassadors of hip-hop culture and capitalism, bridges between the 'street' and the mainstream."<sup>82</sup> So, although Simpson, Jordan, and Woods have been brought to the mainstream through a conversion process evident in the aesthetics, styles, and narrative offerings of their commercial representations, the recent wave of commercials involving black athletes positions them as a mediated bridge who, with the right discipline, body, and surveillance, can serve both black and white America all the way to the bank!

### **NOBODY CAN DUNK ON KING KONG<sup>83</sup>**

The practice of using blackness to sell products to predominantly white consumers is a longstanding one. Whether selling pancakes, breakfast cereal, alcohol, or sports apparel, businesses have historically used a palpable blackness defined by either clownish qualities or physical control to draw in white consumers.<sup>84</sup> Although no longer anonymous or service-oriented as were

Aunt Jemima or Uncle Ben, LeBron, TO, and T-Mac are no less reflective of this history of commodity racism.

Adidas, attempting to compete with the ultimate shoe power, Nike, initiated a national campaign featuring Tracy McGrady in 2004. In this commercial, McGrady dribbles furiously as soldiers in white uniforms shoot in his direction and helicopters tied to his body attempt to thwart his drive to the basket. As planes and men shoot in McGrady's direction, he weaves in and out, dodging their deadly obstacles as he fulfills his mission to score—to entertain and to generate dollars for his overseers. Not bullets, Huey helicopters, tanks, or any military arsenal can stop this physically gifted man: especially while wearing Adidas basketball shoes. The commercial is visually powerful, with this large black man avoiding and ignoring the military assault against him (think about this imagery—a black man so focused on sport, on eliciting pleasure for white men, that he would traverse a military battlefield) waged by these small, white-clothed men with military weaponry. His physical dominance (blackness) overpowers their technological strengths (whiteness). The commercial appears to be straight from *King Kong*, with McGrady donning the role of King Kong, uncontrollable because of his power, yet domesticated enough to elicit pleasure from the white populace. Writing about the history of African American cinema, Ed Guerrero articulates the power of a King Kong trope as a symbol of uncontrollable black sexuality and physicality: “The turbulent power of race is evinced by the variety of ways in which the images and historical experiences of African Americans and other people of color are symbolically figured” in popular media. “The images of racial otherness range from the ideologically obvious (what else is Willie Horton but the political progeny of ‘Gus,’ the black rapist of *Birth of a Nation*?) to cinematic eruptions of socially represented forces of sexuality that carry the threat of dreaded primordial ‘blackness.’ Certainly the same principle threatens an innocent white reality in Kong’s fatal, obsessive encounter with pure white womanhood.”<sup>85</sup> However, with McGrady, the once-dangerous aspects of King Kong have been converted into a desired attribute, which under the right conditions can bring about significant pleasure (at least for Houston Rockets fans).

What is evident within the history of commercial representations of black athletes from Simpson and Green to McGrady, Allen Iverson, and Jermaine O’Neal<sup>86</sup> is that those same bodies that threaten to destroy and corrupt can also be sources of pleasure and profit if and when they are disciplined and controlled. That not all athletes need to (or can) be the “colorless,” as are Jordan, Woods, or Wade, mandates that those others—especially those who serve as a link to a “ghettocentric imagination”<sup>87</sup>—be represented on television in new ways. As black bodies persist as sources of pleasure, profit, and control, the popularity of James, Woods, and countless others, and even of McGrady, Jermaine O’Neal, Allen Iverson, and Kobe (even the “bad ones”



have the potential to generate money) provides legitimacy to a discourse that dismisses and erases the significance of racial (racist) meaning. The power of television and the visibility of presumably powerful black bodies keep critique at arm's length, celebrating sports culture for its elevation of people of color and bridging communities and nations by mutual admiration and dreams of success.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of African American television sportscasters—not so much as an exhaustive examination of this history (one until recently of limited opportunities) but to reveal the complex place of blacks (and blackness) within sports television as commodities, symbols of progress, sources of profit, scrutinized individuals, and sources of debate, contestation, and denunciation. Although former black athletes—at least those who possessed a “desired” identity—have long been able to convert (although not proportional to their athletic dominance) on-the-field persona into studio-analyst and sideline reporting positions, the most sought-after positions—play-by-play anchors—have long been a bastion of Jim Crow. In 1989, only two African American play-by-play announcers work for on the three big networks, all of them at CBS. Only recently, with the emergence of Robin Roberts, John Saunders, Bryant Gumbel, Greg Gumbel, James Brown, Fred Hickman, and Stuart Scott has television “added some color” to its sportscaster lineup. Yet the success cannot be read outside the broader history of black sports television in that the ascendancy of a handful of black sportscasters has come in a moment when networks are seeking to capitalize on the presumption of diversity, even as the majority of these sportscasters are imagined, like Jordan and Woods, as raceless in many regards. Notwithstanding Stuart Scott, “who gets the kids”<sup>88</sup> (Lainson 1998), and Steven A. Smith, Charles Barkley, and Scoop Jackson, each of whom plays a different role by bringing hip-hop and a “keepin’ it real” vibe to sports television, the sports casting profession, like the broader history of African Americans and sports television, continues to be a contested space where identities that confirm dominant ideologies of respectability, blackness, and American racial discourse remain those that are desired, commodified, and put on the air. Thus, while the landscape of African American sports television (whether on-the-field coverage, the racial demographics of the sports television media, the available content and coverage, or the various examples of commercial and commodity sports television) remains in flux, a contested and challenged space of aesthetics and meaning, the ongoing place of African Americans within sports television remains a persistent contradiction: success and hardship, progress and regression, celebration and demonization, hero-worship and scapegoating, visibility and invisibility,

and cheers and boos. It remains a cultural space of complex meaning where blackness functions simultaneously as site, symbol, and sign of the supposed greatness (and exceptionalism) of the United States and as that which threatens its greatness.

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39. Bryant, a member of the Los Angeles Lakers, was arrested and charged in Eagle County, Colorado, with rape; the charges would eventually be dropped, although Bryant would settle a civil suit filed against him by the accuser.

40. Robinson, who has played for the Seattle Seahawks and Minnesota Vikings, has been arrested on multiple occasions for alcohol-related driving offenses.

41. During his short NBA career, Griffin's "rap sheet" has been well documented and discussed within the sports media.

42. Patterson's arrest for assault, attempted rape, and domestic violence has received widespread coverage on television, within newspapers, and on the Internet, not simply because of the crime itself or his involvement, but because of the spat of incidents involving players from the Portland Trailblazers; similar attention to recent arrests of several Cincinnati Bengals has prompted similar coverage.

43. The Tennessee Titans cornerback whose brushes with the law have been well chronicled in the media.

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83. Much of the discussion below originally appeared in an article written by the author entitled, "Cashing in on the Other: Race, Commodity and Surveillance of Contemporary Athletes," (January 26, 2005, [popmatters.com](http://www.popmatters.com)). It is available at <http://www.popmatters.com/sports/features/050126-nikecommercials.shtml> (accessed March 12, 2007); thanks to Tobias Peterson and Sarah Zupko.

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85. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Imagine in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 41.

86. David Leonard, "Cashing in on the Other."

87. S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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## To Be—Or Not to Be—Like Mike

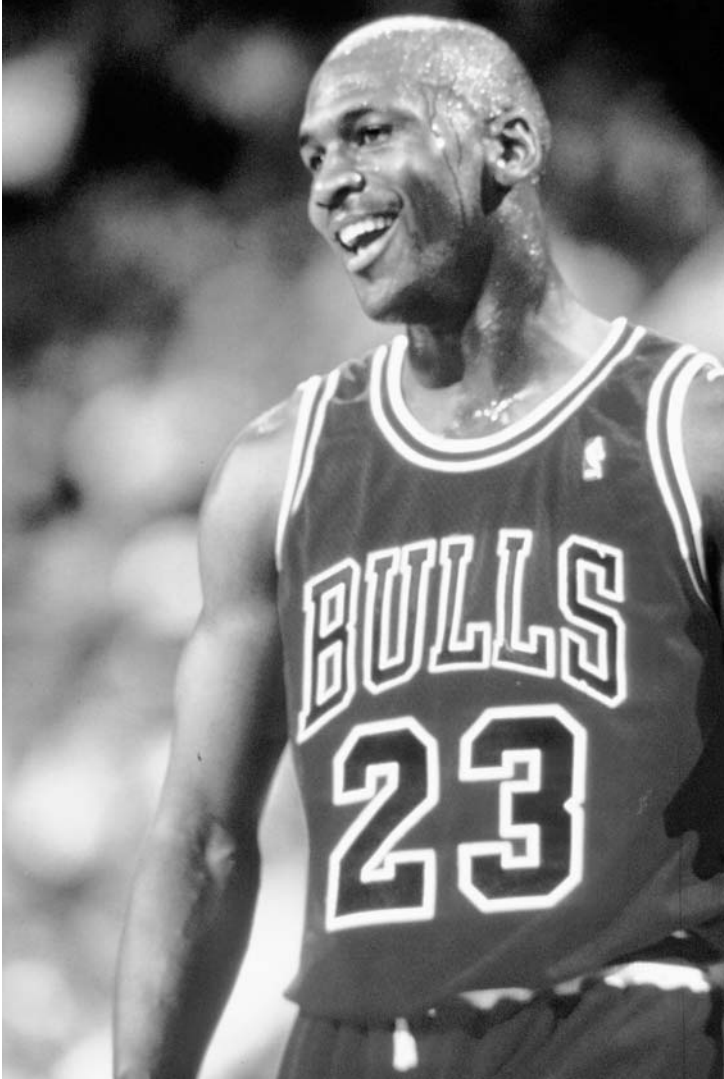
*Sanford Richmond*

Michael Jeffrey Jordan: what is there to be said that hasn't already been said about the greatest basketball player of all time? When I was asked to do this chapter, I was told to write some type of historical narrative on the National Basketball Association (better known simply as the NBA), the American sports league of professional basketball. And when I was asked to do this historical piece on the NBA, the first thing I said to myself was, "Don't do anything on Michael Jordan." That was the first thought that came to my mind because so much has already been written about Michael Jordan: Michael Jordan the basketball player, Michael Jordan the man, Michael Jordan the family man, Michael Jordan the name brand, even Michael Jordan the baseball player—the list is endless.

When doing a piece on the NBA, especially from a historical perspective, it is almost an absolute requirement to mention Michael Jordan. Not mentioning Michael Jordan is like not mentioning God when saying your prayers. The analogy might sound extreme (and even corny), but it's accurate as far as the standards of American fame go. It has been said that the back of Jordan's bald head is "better recognized than the faces of Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich and Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> It's also been said that Jordan is "more popular than Jesus . . . except with better endorsement deals."<sup>2</sup> Jordan's supernatural fame is what influenced the highly popular Gatorade sports drink commercials "Be Like Mike."

As the commercial jingle goes, "sometimes I dream . . . that he is me . . . you've got to see that's how I dream to be." The commercial is implicitly saying that Jordan is more than a mere mortal, or even a great basketball player: he's a "dream," a fantasy of the American imagination that parallels something of another world. The fact is—not only would it be hard not to mention Jordan in an historical NBA piece; it would be hard not to mention his name in a piece discussing the landscape of American sports in the past century without making him the top story. Jordan has transcended basketball and sports more than any other athlete in history has.

Michael Jordan



*Photofest*

But why? Why has Jordan transcended his sport more than any other figure in the history of any other sport? Is it because he is the greatest basketball player ever? Not necessarily so; basketball has only gained popularity in the last thirty years, but sports such as baseball and football have garnered most of the popularity for the majority of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> He is widely considered the greatest basketball player ever, but why is he



considered the sports figure who excelled beyond the expectations of his sport more than any other figure? (ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network), the twenty-four-hour sports channel that is the current king of sports news in America and around the globe, named Jordan the number-one athlete of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>)

Some have argued, as I will here, that Jordan's mammoth acceptance by mainstream America is strictly because of the image he publicly portrayed to the world: a nice, approachable man; a good father and husband; a person exuding family values. This is what the American public is told constantly about why Jordan was so loved and cherished as a sports figure.

And I will make another argument: more than because of his acceptance as a dominant basketball player, he was so universally admired because he portrayed a nonthreatening image to white America's insecurities, anxieties, and fears of the very menacing image of the proverbial black man that has been "the nation's most historically oppressed and reviled population."<sup>5</sup> Jordan showed to the public that he was a gentle, soft, and kind person who didn't project any type of fear or uneasiness to white America.

He was the ultimate crossover icon; he made white America feel comfortable "without ever having their race guilt triggered."<sup>6</sup> America, who usually sees "the black body as a potential measure of evil and menace," found another way of "containing blackness" by normalizing Jordan and making him exceptional as a service to whites.<sup>7</sup> In addition to displaying that he was a nonthreatening black man, Jordan made it his mission to be an apolitical figure, making sure not to take any stands on any racial, political, or class injustices happening around the country, or any injustices that were happening to black professional athletes during and after his era of dominance.

Jordan felt that his fame was a result of "society looking for something positive,"<sup>8</sup> instead of someone who wouldn't have to make society think about the issue of race. This went over well with white American mainstream values, who traditionally view race as a nonissue or a problem of the past. In the process, Jordan allowed issues of racial and political injustices to happen without a word.

In the post-Michael Jordan era of basketball there has been a growing breed of NBA players who have not embraced his image; many current NBA players have chosen "Not To Be Like Mike." This rejection of Jordan's image is not just a rejection of Jordan the man and what he represented on a personal and political level but a hint at an internal tension that has been happening in black America for over two decades now—the tension between the Civil Rights generation and the hip-hop generation. The rejection of the image of Jordan, a Civil Rights beneficiary, adopted by many of the NBA's current players comes from an allegiance to hip-hop.

This is a tension that has had a new life in the wake of national radio host and shock jock, Don Imus, who recently called the black females of

the Rutgers women's basketball team "some nappy headed hos," during the 2007 NCAA Woman's Basketball Championship.<sup>9</sup> Civil Rights loyalists in the black community believed that the derogatory comments made by Imus were encouraged by the language prevalent in hip-hop music. Hip-hop, which has been seen over the years to be misogynistic toward women—particularly black women—received the majority of criticism and blame for Imus's comments. This is just one of the many myopic views that the detractors of hip-hop see as representative of nihilistic behavior and counter-productive to African American empowerment.

Jordan is a "tweener" of sorts. He came on the scene after the NBA suffered a massive image problem in which players were more known for their cocaine habits off the court than their physical exploits on it. The drug problem saturated the NBA during the 1970s. After Jordan retired in 1998, leaving behind as his legacy his mark of dominance on the court and his clean-cut image off the court, the NBA was back in image chaos again with the up and coming hip-hop generation, who exuded the ethos of "keeping it real" at all costs.

I will argue not only that current NBA players who represent hip-hop, such as Allen Iverson, Jermaine O'Neal, and Rasheed Wallace, have shown that they represent hip-hop but that through their adherence to hip-hop they have not given in to the Civil Rights philosophy of assimilation and accommodation. These hip-hop icons who happen to be the NBA superstars of today have had their acts of racial courage (in the form of words and actions) simply ignored, ridiculed, and undermined by the likes of Jordan and other NBA icons such as Earvin "Magic" Johnson.

Johnson, who played his entire career with the Los Angeles Lakers, was the player before Jordan who was responsible for bringing national attention to the NBA like never before. Johnson, simply known as "Magic," with his dominance on the court, endorsement deals, and "magnetic smile" (which classified him as "nonthreatening black male" to white America) opened the door for the "cultural behemoth" that Michael Jordan would later become.<sup>10</sup> Jordan and Johnson believe that the current players are taking advantage of what they constructed into the current conglomerate that is the NBA today.

This type of ridicule by Jordan and others has given Commissioner David Stern and NBA league officials unguarded and ruthless autonomy over players today. Jordan and his ego create an environment in which David Stern and his Republican league officials can inflict power moves on young black athletes as never before seen in sports. Jordan's narcissistic instincts tend only to focus on the current NBA players' multimillion-dollar paychecks and endorsement deals, which, Jordan constantly reminds whoever is listening, he established first.

Jordan, along with other icons who criticize current NBA players for not respecting the foundation they built, simply ignore the stands that these

current players (under the principles of hip-hop) are carrying out. The Civil Rights generation and loyalists who believe the hip-hop generation is not respecting the bedrock of freedom that was paved out for them share the feelings that Jordan has about the current crop of NBA players.

But, just like the Civil Rights movement, Jordan covets constant praise for what was done in the past while ignoring what the hip-hop generation is accomplishing in the present era to right the societal wrongs that continue to affect African Americans and people of color. The Civil Rights gatekeepers of black America refuse to acknowledge the hip-hop activism that happens quite often in present day America: not just by rappers, but by people who claim hip-hop as their music and their culture.

This is parallel to what Jordan and others like him do when they refuse to acknowledge what current NBA players are carrying out: speaking out against the tyrannical actions of David Stern and the sports establishment and against racial issues that impinge on the civil liberties of current NBA players, constantly working in their communities to show that they don't forget where they come from and that they know the value and impact of their fame and fortune.

By speaking out against Stern and the establishment of sports while at the same time giving back to their communities, they are not only showing respect for the league but are also showing something that a lot of Civil Rights loyalist feel hip-hop doesn't have—integrity. This is something that Jordan never exhibited with his apolitical, corporate-sponsoring behavior, even though he knew the double standard of being a famous black athlete in America.

Jordan, who was well aware of his status as a sports superhero, was also well aware of his status as a black man. But instead of taking on issues that affected African Americans in and outside of the sports arena, he chose the option to remain silent and decided to put all his energy into becoming a corporate tool for mainstream America. His apolitical approach is inherited from the Civil Rights ethos of assimilating into white mainstream society, something that hip-hop—and the NBA players representing it—haven't done.

I will make the argument that this tension between Jordan and the NBA players today is a symbolic tension that has been taking place for a long time between the hip-hop generation and the civil rights generation of activists, loyalists, and beneficiaries.

## THE IMAGE AWARDS

As a person who represents the hip-hop generation completely, I become weary at times of hearing about the doors that were opened for me by the Civil Rights movement. But as a black man in America, I do find many reasons to be thankful for that era of social and political struggle.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is arguably the social movement that benefited black America more than any other in history. The movement was so successful that it opened doors for the generation of African American baby boomers<sup>11</sup> that were never opened to any generation of blacks since that which came off the slave ships in 1619.

The movement influenced the Great Society Programs that were initiated by president Lyndon B. Johnson, but the fight to get these initiatives established was because of the persistent activist struggles of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights collective. Initiatives such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were just some of the groundbreaking programs that were enacted during this time. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a very powerful initiative, from a broader context, because it finally allowed blacks the right to vote.

This made blacks part of the political process in America, something violently prohibited in the past by law enforcement and by the iconic and long-standing white supremacy group, the Ku Klux Klan, organizations that were interchangeable in many cities around the country. Reverend Jesse Jackson, Civil Rights icon and protégé of Martin Luther King, recently discussed the impact of the Voting Rights Act, comparing it to the end of United States slavery: "We got the dream realized ninety-five years after 1870: 1965. So it took us another ninety-five years to get the right to vote. We've been citizens, in fact, forty-two years."<sup>12</sup>

Though at times I may have my reservations about how Jackson approaches issues concerning African Americans, these remarks put extraordinary clarity on black existence in America before the Civil Rights movement. Blacks have been in the United States for over four hundred years building the country through a legacy of slave labor and economic exploitation but have been actual United States citizens for only 42 years (43 at the time of this writing). The Civil Rights movement was not only a watershed moment for America but was a watershed moment for people of color around the globe as they convinced and "inspired millions around the world to throw off the shackles of white rule."<sup>13</sup>

So what to do with this new-found "freedom" and brand-new access to mainstream America during the 1970s and 1980s? Even though Civil Rights beneficiaries were given access to white mainstream America more than any other African American group before them, racism still persisted. Those blacks who could afford to move out of segregated neighborhoods and into better neighborhoods, seeking employment outside the black community, were in a perplexing position. Should they cause an even greater stir to fight the racial injustices that remained embedded in society, or should they just stay silent and enjoy what their parents, grandparents, and ancestors had never enjoyed? Most chose to go with the latter, Nelson George recalls:

Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of civil rights as a way to open doors of opportunity was working—for some. The 70s would spawn the first graduating class of affirmative action babies. They walked through doors cracked open by dog-bitten marchers in the South and radical nationalists in the North. They were not smarter or more worthy than their parents; they were just better trained in the ways of white mainstream protocol. . . . Starting in the 70s, the new black professionals had an opportunity to pursue their ambitions with a freedom previously unknown to African Americans. But they were faced with a new conflict between maintaining loyalty to their generally white employers—protect that job!—and espousing a problack agenda that could endanger their jobs.<sup>14</sup>

But even though blacks were moving up the ladder of economic success, they were still in a highly racially contested space. In this perplexed position of not “rocking the boat” of this more covert and nuanced racism, the stress level rose, which created health problems—hypertension became the primary health risk of African Americans at this time.<sup>15</sup> This was one of many health problems that African Americans would lead in for decades to come.

Not wanting to risk what generations of blacks before had never enjoyed, the African American community, particularly the middle and upper classes, decided to maintain their image so that there would be no excuse for the American mainstream to deny them access to jobs, housing, or anything else that was part of the American Dream. During this time, blacks were told that “if they did everything right—if they went to school and worked hard and made something of themselves—race would no longer be an issue”; but this was not the case.<sup>16</sup> Integration into white neighborhoods and into white society made blacks more vulnerable to the racist attributes of the white mainstream.

But most of black America “sucked it up,” so to speak, keeping silent, for the most part, on their racial and political agendas and trying to abide by the rules of a country that still didn't want to view them as equal citizens. This type of internal representation spread across the black community and into popular culture. Appropriately, during this racially confusing time in the post-Civil Rights era, the NAACP Image Awards was birthed in 1969. The NAACP, or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909, created an award show to display the best of black entertainment in film and in television.

But the catch was that the Image Awards had to go to the nominee who displayed the most “positive images” of black people through entertainment and popular culture.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the years, the NAACP has had its share of blacks whom it believed to be undeserving of an Image Award because they didn't represent the best of the race. Slain hip-hop icon

Tupac Shakur was nominated for outstanding actor in 1994 for the film *Poetic Justice*, but the NAACP struggled to nominate him because they felt his music didn't represent the best of African Americans, in addition to the fact that he was just accused of sexual assault in December of 1993.<sup>18</sup>

In 2004, legendary hip-hop group Outkast received six nominations for their double disc LP "Speakerboxx/The Love Below," an event that created much controversy among many of the Civil Rights faithful because of the song Outkast had released on their 1998 *Aquemini* album entitled "Rosa Parks."<sup>19</sup> Civil Rights loyalists felt that this song was disrespectful to the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement" (who in 1955 refused to walk to the back of the bus when she was ordered to do so by a white bus driver in Montgomery, Alabama).

In 1999, Parks and her handlers filed a lawsuit against Outkast claiming that the rap duo misappropriated Park's name in the song while employing obscene language in the process.<sup>20</sup> The suit was finally settled in 2005, but the animosity towards hip-hop was clear. These incidents are merely representative of the many ideological tensions that have existed between hip-hop and the Civil Rights collective.

## IMAGE AND SPORTS

The world of sports became representative of the image narrative's fantasy notion of racial equality with real-life consequences of racial silence. Names such as that of football icon O. J. Simpson were starting to be regulars on the American scene and on television, advertising for local businesses and corporate sponsors. But in sports there was more of a problem. Black athletes were held to a higher standard than their white counterparts. The mantra of "just shut up and play" was more directed at African American sports stars than at anyone else.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there lived an athlete who may have forced America to think about race more than any other African American athlete in the history of sports: legendary boxer Muhammad Ali. Ali is a figure, it can be argued, who was just as significant as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, leader of the Nation of Islam during the 1960s, a time when racial and political upheaval were the norm.

Ali revolutionized sports with his supreme boxing skills and his mouth (which became the basis of derogatory terms thrown at him, such as the "Louisville Lip"), spouting verbal venom at opponents and at American racism. His stands on the Vietnam War, as well as his initiation into the Nation of Islam, his friendship with Malcolm X, and his persistent and uncompromising views on race and politics, made Ali a national villain. Ali used his boxing expertise and fame as a platform from which to not only badmouth opponents and tell the world how good-looking and "pretty" he

was, but also to discuss, debate, and defend issues that concerned black America and people of color around the world. Ali's stands on issues regarding race, class, and politics put the sports establishment on high alert to the point that they wanted to ensure that another athlete of Ali's stature and character would not come around again.

Ali wasn't the only athlete who gave his opinions on race and injustice in America. John Carlos and Tommy Smith, the track-and-field stars who raised their black-gloved fists in the air at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, performed this courageous act of defiance to represent the injustices that were happening to blacks in America and people of color around the world. Football legend Jim Brown also used his fame as a way to be politically and racially active during this time of constant racial strife.

Baseball icon Curt Flood, who revolutionized free agency in professional sports, wrote a letter to the baseball commissioner at the prime of his career in 1969 and said, "After twelve years in the major leagues, I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold irrespective of my wishes."<sup>21</sup> Flood in his letter was referencing slavery as regarding his fight about being traded from his current team, the St. Louis Cardinals, without his consent.

Jim Brown even organized a group of African American athletes to stand up and defend Ali's refusal to be drafted in the Vietnam War; two of the athletes who stood in Ali's defense were NBA greats Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Boston Celtic icon Bill Russell. Many of these athletes were outspoken about issues concerning black athletes and the black community at large and were exiled by the sports establishment and exiled "from the nation's fantasy of the American Dream."<sup>22</sup> These acts of racial and political courage were soon silenced by the institution of sports and by the legacy of the Civil Rights movement.

In the book *40 Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*, author and *New York Times* columnist William C. Rhoden talks to the National Football League (NFL) legend of the 1970s, Kellen Winslow Sr. Winslow played tight end for the San Diego Chargers for most of his career and was also a post-Civil Rights product. Rhoden summarizes Winslow's thoughts on his generation of athletes as "the generation that stopped talking about race."<sup>23</sup>

In the book, Rhoden interviews Winslow and probes Winslow to go further with his analysis:

I am probably the second generation after integration. We stopped talking about it, race. As a collective, our generation stopped talking about it and that *put us behind*. You had to do certain things, you played a certain role to be a part of the system to survive. The athletes and the black coaches had to talk one way around each other, one way around fellow coaches and players or the white alums and white big donors.<sup>24</sup>

This was the double edged sword of the Civil Rights movement: the movement fought against racial injustice only to be silent when it arose again. Any type of outspokenness against the system of sports or the racial politics of America was not only discouraged by the establishment of sports and the American mainstream, but by the established Civil Rights movement as well.

This created an environment in which the establishment could use the silence of prominent black athletes to create the narrative of racial equality and meritocracy. But, unfortunately, it used athletes such as O. J. Simpson, who prided himself on his apolitical behavior during his reign of football dominance in the 1960s and 1970s (one might say he is feeling the karmic consequences of being so apolitical) not only to promote the safe, nonthreatening black male who also didn't espouse any views on race, but also to show that the race problem had gone away. The success and acceptance of the black athlete meant that everyone—no matter his or her race—could participate in the American Dream. These daily race and political struggles transitioned right into the 1970s, during which the NBA began to come into focus because of its increasing black population and its increasing drug problem.

Where there is image there is responsibility—a pressure-filled responsibility that was not handed down to white athletes. The NBA in the 1970s was known as a league that, in the words of David Stern, was “too black, too drug-infested.”<sup>25</sup> Harvey Araton talks in his book *Crashing the Borders: How Basketball Won the World and Lost its Soul at Home* about his racial gullibility as a young reporter covering the New York Knicks:

When I was a young Knicks beat reporter for the New York Post in 1979, the team fielded its first all-black roster, and an early season meeting with the Detroit Pistons was the first game in NBA history without a single white player. I wrote that it was an important social achievement for African Americans but also a watershed development [in] that Americans were by and large too enlightened by fear. All good intentions aside, I should have been whistled for flagrant naïveté. Then, as now, pro basketball's blackness was always a major component in how the league was promoted, received, and, ultimately, judged. Race was the elephant in the arena, the microcosm of the society at large, whether people were willing to see it or not.<sup>26</sup>

Race was the elephant in every NBA arena because it was a microcosm of the way in which race was a huge and longstanding elephant in American society. The pressure of the white American gaze upon the black athlete became more burdensome because “the positive image” that had to be maintained in order to succeed also included judgmental observation and behavior surveillance. This burden of being perfect, mistake-free



citizens that was placed on black America went double for black American athletes, who were handed financial riches and celebrity status. This was the case in the 1970s, when the NBA became “too black, too drug infested,” which inspired a *Los Angeles Times* article in 1980 called “The NBA and Cocaine: Nothing to Snort At.” This article was “accepted and referenced by many of that time as an indication that the NBA was out of control.”<sup>27</sup>

Two prime examples of this emerging problem were NBA stars David Thompson and Spencer Haywood. Haywood was an interesting figure because he was the first player to challenge the age limit in 1970, arguing that because he was the main financial support in his family, that he should begin earning a living regardless of the age requirement. The Supreme Court ruled in Haywood’s favor, and in the process he revolutionized the skip from high school to the professional ranks<sup>28</sup> that would later be altered and overturned by the slick and deceitful maneuverings of David Stern.

Unfortunately, Haywood was also a person with a heavy cocaine habit—a cocaine habit so bad that he was caught sleeping during a practice in the 1980 NBA finals during his stint with the Los Angeles Lakers. It was later found out that he was up the whole night before snorting cocaine.<sup>29</sup>

Another high-profile case was that of Denver Nugget star David Thompson, who never reached his full potential as a NBA superstar because of his penchant for cocaine. This nasty habit eventually led to a night of hedonistic fun at a club that became the leading symbol of cocaine and excess in the 1970s: New York’s *Studio 54*. When Thompson was at *Studio 54*, he fell down a flight of stairs and injured his knees, fittingly ending his career. But cocaine was not just a drug affecting the NBA; it was a drug affecting popular culture and other segments of society at large. Black NBA players, however, were not afforded this luxury of indulgence or the sympathy of human weakness.

An anonymous source spoke about this issue: “The players are so street-smart, their sophistication is just below that of a hardened convict. They know every angle on how to get women and drugs. They are so far ahead of the security men it’s unbelievable. They know every hustle.”<sup>30</sup> In this statement, one can slowly see the criminalization of the black athlete starting to form in the American imagination.

## THE RISE OF JORDAN

The irony is that the Civil Rights movement fought for racial justice and equality, although the legacy is drenched in accommodation by which “black people were often asked to subordinate their own desires for the good of the country.”<sup>31</sup> The Civil Rights movement fought for racial equality, but after the fight to seek entrance into the mainstream was purportedly won, most blacks didn’t pursue the struggle even though most blacks

knew racial equality still hadn't been achieved yet. When one finally achieved success, whether as a corporate employee or a famous black celebrity or athlete, he or she followed an unwritten rule of silence in order to continue his or her middle- and upper-class lifestyle.

No one exudes the unwritten rule of silence more than Michael Jeffrey Jordan, who was born on February 17, 1963, six months before the March on Washington that occurred in August of 1963, when the Civil Rights movement had "reached its apex."<sup>32</sup>

Every in-depth feature on Jordan always tells the story of how when he was in high school, he was cut from the varsity basketball team his sophomore year. But he worked hard during the off-season (and grew four inches), earning him a spot on the roster for the next two seasons—and earning him selection to the McDonald's All-American team his senior year in high school. After this "fall-and-get-back-up" scenario, the rest is history: he had a great college career at the University of North Carolina (UNC), where in his freshman year he hit the game-winning shot and the UNC basketball team won the NCAA national championship.

Two seasons later, as a junior (his last season as a collegiate athlete), he was named the NCAA college basketball player of the year, winning the John R. Wooden Award and the Naismith College Player of the Year Award. But this narrative—of Jordan being cut from the high school basketball team, of him shooting the game-winning jump-shot to win the NCAA championship as a freshman—is a narrative showing that anyone, no matter what race, can make it. This narrative parallels Jordan's universal image as an everyman (every race) hero.

Though Jordan's narrative fits a bigger picture of symbolism as a meritocracy icon for white America, the legend of Jordan is still true. After his successful collegiate career, he has arguably had the greatest career in the history of the business we call professional sports. He has won six championships for the Chicago Bulls and was named Rookie of the Year. He earned five league Most Valuable Player (MVP) awards, one Defensive MVP, six championship finals MVPs, and 10 scoring titles. Seen even from my own unofficial expertise and perspective about the sport of basketball, Jordan is the greatest player of all time.

But what Jordan became known for besides his outstanding basketball skills were his billion-dollar endorsements. The average American who didn't follow basketball or even sports at all usually knew who Jordan was because of the heavy volume of television commercials. But the reasons why this happened were not only because of his superior skills—they were also because he was nonthreatening to the status-quo, who still didn't want a black man to show any racial or political allegiance. Jordan filled a space for America in which racism and discrimination were, "if not absent, at least easily negotiated."<sup>33</sup>

"People don't look at Michael as being black," David Falk, Jordan's agent, emphatically states, putting his client's fame and his race in broader context. "They accept that he's different because he is a celebrity."<sup>34</sup> This statement represents the mindset that most white Americans felt when embracing Michael Jordan the basketball player and, more importantly, Michael Jordan the man.

Jordan's evasiveness towards racial issues made him even more attractive to corporate sponsors including Nike, McDonald's, Coke, and Gatorade, among many others. He was a black man who was not really black, and the ambiguity of his raceless image built a ten-billion-dollar industry (and counting) off the Michael Jordan name brand.<sup>35</sup>

The more racially detached he was, the better it was for the corporate sponsors he was advertising for. Name-brand corporations that wanted Jordan to be the face of their company counted on Jordan's racial impartialness—and Jordan didn't disappoint. In 1992, at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina, he refused to support the construction of a black cultural center, which would have been the first of its kind ever on the UNC campus. The students who led this organized rally to get the cultural center built even offered to name a library after Jordan, but Jordan still declined to support the center.<sup>36</sup>

In 1996, Jordan was asked to endorse black democratic Senate candidate Harvey Grant against segregationist Republican senator Jesse Helms in Jordan's home state of North Carolina. Helms, a racially polarizing figure, had opposed a Martin Luther King day bill in 1983 and dubbed Jordan's alma mater, the University of North Carolina, "The University of Negroes and Communists."<sup>37</sup> Jordan, instead of showing his support to Grant—or at least his aversion to Helms—made a remark that would eventually, and rightfully, go down in infamy: "Republicans buy sneakers, too."

A comment of this magnitude made Jordan an endorsement dream while simultaneously making him a full-fledged member of an oppressive system—corporate America. He officially became part of a corporate America that had been (and still is) the zeitgeist of mainstream power and influence; a corporate America that had been responsible for marginalizing middle and upper class blacks in the post-Civil Rights era of purported racial harmony.

Norman Denzin places Jordan's racial legacy in perspective: "No other NBA player has surpassed Jordan's achievements, no other player makes the money he does with the commercial endorsements. To read race and postindustrial America through Jordan (and Nike) is to examine how this man mastered his sport by being subservient to his master's rules."<sup>38</sup> No NBA player had "surpassed Jordan's achievements" because Jordan was "subservient to his master"—the corporate sponsor. Not only was Jordan subservient to his master, he was a willing participant.

**ALLEN IVERSON AND HIP-HOP**

Another unfortunate legacy of the Civil Rights movement was that not everyone benefited from it. The Civil Rights movement benefited a population of blacks who could afford to move out of the black segregated neighborhoods and start new lives in a newly integrated world. But just as many—perhaps even more—blacks couldn't afford to move out of the segregated neighborhoods. This left the black neighborhoods in even harsher conditions than before desegregation. During this time, a powerful black underclass began to materialize that was becoming “morally dissolute” and “culturally deprived.”<sup>39</sup>

What was also created out of these desolate conditions was a music and culture that would later be named “hip-hop.” Hip-hop, birthed in the Bronx, New York, and Los Angeles, was created out of the conditions that saw abandonment of the black underclass. This urban condition left much of the African American population in dire ruins, as Todd Boyd explains: “The civil rights movement did provide limited opportunities for individual African Americans in cultural production, yet it did little to change African Americans as a group.”<sup>40</sup>

**Philadelphia 76er Allen Iverson reacts after making a basket in the fourth quarter against the Milwaukee Bucks in 2004.**



*AP Photo/Morry Gash*

Hip-hop, from its beginning stages, was in ideological opposition to the Civil Rights movement in its levels of hope and upward mobility. The advantages that befell the black middle and upper classes, the ones who could afford to leave the segregated conditions of the black neighborhoods, left a black underclass more isolated from society than ever before, both financially and emotionally. And conditions in black neighborhoods only grew worse with rising criminal activity. Gangs rose up in black neighborhoods everywhere during the late 1960s, spreading rapidly throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The newfound energy of this rising criminal underclass's desperation and desire gave birth to hip-hop music.

During hip-hop's meager beginnings in the late 1970s and early 1980s, hip-hop was excluded from the white American mainstream and black American (Civil Rights-friendly) mainstream. Fixtures of black popular culture *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, the NAACP Image Awards, and black radio stations avoided hip-hop as they would the flu. Despite this, hip-hop became even stronger through consistent great music, pounding bass beats, perseverance, and nonconformity.

Hip-hop became the most overtly oppositional music genre ever made, creating a "marketing revolution" never seen before in the history of popular culture.<sup>41</sup> Rappers and DJs, the core of the music, began not only to affect a generation with their rebellious music but to affect a generation with their rebellious style. This rise in hip-hop can also explain current NBA great Allen Iverson.

In 1993, when Allen Iverson was still in high school, Jordan retired from basketball (in the first of his three retirements throughout his career), and a neighborhood friend told Iverson that he should be "the answer" to Jordan's departure, which is now Iverson's famous nickname. This neighborhood confidant said, simply, "Everybody wants to be Mike, but Mike ain't around. So you're the answer, now."<sup>42</sup>

The nickname is cosmic timing to Jordan's career and image. Allen Iverson was born in 1975 in Hampton, Virginia, in a very poor urban area called Newport News. Iverson, who grew up in the urban plight that was left behind during the Civil Rights migration, was a product of the same conditions that constructed hip-hop music. Allen Iverson, also nicknamed AI, has been the embodiment of the hip-hop generation in the NBA with his penitentiary-influenced hairstyle, or cornrows, and the tattoos that emblazon his entire body. Iverson has a set of friends with whom he grew up (and with whom he still maintains a lifetime bond) who came from the same neighborhood and conditions that Iverson suffered through as a child.

Iverson and his friends formed a crew called "Cru-Thik" when they were teenagers. In media and NBA circles, "Cru-Thik" has been compared to a street gang and has been the subject of controversy over the span of

Iverson's career.<sup>43</sup> All of these features and characteristics have added to his infamy as the troublesome bad boy of sports.

Iverson was "The Answer" in many ways that were oppositional to Jordan. In Iverson's rookie season as a member of the Philadelphia 76ers, he played against Jordan and the Chicago Bulls in a game in which he scored forty-four points, an impressive showing from the young rookie trying to make his mark on the league. But what was more impressive was the famous "crossover" that people are still talking about today.

Iverson faked left with ball in hand and went right, Jordan lost his balance, and Iverson hit the open jump shot. This play is significant for a variety of reasons. Not only was Jordan a dominant offensive player—Jordan's defense was arguably just as dominant; hardly any player in the game could score on Jordan at will because of his legendarily rigid defensive skills.

Iverson scored forty-four points that night and made the best player in the game look defensively bad. Then, in the aftermath of the famous "crossover," Iverson said, "Jordan is not my hero."<sup>44</sup> Not only did Iverson leave Jordan stumbling on the basketball court, he left Jordan's image stumbling, too: stumbling to gain significance in a league that was slowly moving on without him, even though Jordan was still in the league and still the NBA's best player.

In Iverson's sophomore season, during the annual NBA all-star event in Cleveland, Ohio, Iverson openly displayed his controversial hairstyle to the sports world: the infamous cornrows. The talk of his new hairstyle upstaged the all-star event and the fiftieth anniversary of the NBA, during which the fifty greatest players in the league's history were honored, including Jordan.<sup>45</sup> Iverson's hip-hop zest and courageous, open demonstration to the world who he was both internally and externally paved new ground for a generation in sports that wanted to be accepted at face value without compromising neighborhood loyalties and streetwise personalities.

As Larry Platt explains, "[s]hortly after Iverson's entry into the league, it became clear that he represented an epochal moment, the dawn of a new era for the black athlete. Something more in-your-face, more consciously authentic than [*sic*] the Jordan model, an image owed more to hip-hop than to Motown."<sup>46</sup> Iverson rejected Michael Jordan-style assimilation for his own hip-hop principles of staying true to one's self. Iverson was symbolic of "a cultural crossroads"<sup>47</sup> in the NBA—and David Stern, with the help of NBA league officials, has expended nonstop effort to put a halt to this hip-hop renaissance of attitude and style.

## THE POST-JORDAN ERA—THE RISE OF THE DAVID STERN ADMINISTRATION

After the 1998 season that saw Jordan win his sixth championship with the Chicago Bulls and go into his second of three retirements at season's end, David Stern and NBA league owners used the opportunity to prohibit

NBA players from going into their locker rooms for half of the following season (1998–1999). This was a strategic move to enforce players to fall in line with a new collective bargaining agreement that would regulate player contracts. This bold move has been called “the 1998 NBA Lockout.”

This was the first step of many that Stern would execute to position the league under his dictatorial thumb after Jordan’s departure. Harvey Araton explains this underhanded business tactic: “The man who once dubbed himself ‘Easy Dave’ locked out his players for much of the 1998–99 season, demanding and getting what baseball owners would die for, what sports management people called cost ‘certainty,’ in the form of a firm ceiling on salaries.”<sup>48</sup>

Allen Iverson would influence the precedent for what the league did not want. The new class of hip-hop athletes was making it easier for Stern to enforce his policies upon the league. The media and the sports public at large consistently scrutinized, criminalized, and ridiculed this latest breed of hip-hop resistance populating the NBA. This made it easier for Stern and his Republican league officials to flex their unrestricted power—and nothing gave Stern more power than the “Palace Brawl” that happened in a game when the Detroit Pistons hosted the Indiana Pacers on November, 19, 2004, at the Palace of Auburn Hills in Auburn Hills, Michigan.

Troubled star and former Indiana Pacer Ron Artest fouled Ben Wallace, formerly of the Detroit Pistons. Wallace became upset, and began to push Artest. Artest backed away and decided to cool his anger by sitting on the press table. A fan of the Pistons (who would be later known as John Green) threw a cup of beer at Artest, assaulting him in the neck and chest. Artest immediately jumped into the stands and went after the assailant who struck him, but he physically struck the wrong man, a longtime Detroit Piston fan by the name of A. J. Shackleford.

Green, who threw the cup, was standing right beside Shackleford when Artest attacked him. Even though Shackleford did not assault Artest, he was severely taunting and heckling him—to the point that Shackleford could be seen cheering when Green tossed the cup in Artest’s direction. This is why Artest pursued Shackleford: the celebration of this assault made Artest feel that Shackleford was responsible for the action.<sup>49</sup>

While Artest was attacking Shackleford, Green used the opportunity to attack Artest from behind. Chaos ensued and many of the fans began participating in the brawl, including Artest’s teammates Stephen Jackson and Jermaine O’Neal. Jackson and O’Neal begin flinging punches toward the fans in defense of Artest. O’Neal ran across the court and struck a fan with a closed fist who was coming onto the court. After what some called the “Malice at the Palace,”<sup>50</sup> Stern’s tyrannical power moves start coming into public focus.

After the brawl, Stern suspended Jermaine O’Neal for twenty-five games and Stephen Jackson for thirty. (O’Neal appealed and eventually had his

sentence reduced to fifteen.) But, in the most preposterous act of power ever seen in American sports, Stern decided to suspend Ron Artest for the rest of the seventy-three games left in the season, including the playoffs. The suspension of Artest was the fruit of what Stern had wanted to implement against NBA players since the beginning of the hip-hop emergence that was spreading rapidly across the league.

What makes the seventy-three-game suspension so preposterous is that Green, the fan, struck the first blow by throwing the cup of beer. Artest was the victim of an assault by a drunken, abusive white fan who had previous criminal convictions that included a multitude of DUIs (Driving Under the Influence), counterfeiting, and felony assault. It is obvious that Artest was only defending himself.

Artest, a documented troublemaker on the court who got into verbal and physical altercations with opponents, teammates, and coaches, had never been convicted of a crime off the court until this brawl, although he was recently arrested for domestic abuse of his wife in Sacramento, California, where he is now a member of the Sacramento Kings. In May of 2007, he was later convicted and served 10 days in jail for the incident. And subsequently (but not surprisingly), he was suspended by the NBA for seven games at the beginning of the 2007–2008 season as punishment for his legal trouble.

But Stern, in his knee-jerk reaction to punish disruptive hip-hop NBA players such as Artest (who never hid his lifetime love of hip-hop), didn't have the patience to investigate the track record of the abusive white fan. Stern didn't take the time to find out whether this fan might have been a criminally disruptive force in the past (and he had been). Even though Green was banned from Detroit Piston games for life and served thirty days in jail for the incident two years afterward, the seventy-three-game suspension sent a message to the league: things were changing. From this moment on, the quest to place the league back in a Jordan-centric, behaved state was in full effect.

## **FAHRENHEIT RON ARTEST<sup>51</sup>**

After the brawl, and after Ron Artest became America's new black celebrity bogeyman, Stern and his league officials began enacting rules advantageous to their agenda. A few months after the brawl, it was announced that Stern would increase the age-limit to nineteen instead of eighteen, causing players to spend one year in college before entering the NBA draft.

It was claimed that teenagers coming straight from high school were lowering the standards of play—that the level of talent in the league, so high for so long, was beginning to deteriorate. But this rule actually had nothing to do with talent level and everything to do with young, black men earning multimillion-dollar paychecks. Since the emergence of the



hip-hop athlete in the NBA during the mid-1990s, there has been a national outcry by the media and the public at large about NBA players receiving too much money.

Embattled executive director of the NBA Players Association Billy Hunter, who clashes annually with Stern about his despotic NBA policies, has said of the public image of NBA players after the Palace Brawl, "I'm strongly of the opinion that a significant number of people in this country feel that most of the guys in the league don't deserve what they earn. And I think a lot of it has to do with color, with race."<sup>52</sup>

The Palace Brawl only exacerbated the media's and the public's hostile feelings toward millionaire ballplayers; to decelerate this influx of young, black, rich men entering the league, the age limit was born. The frightening thought of young, black men earning large amounts of money was now "camouflaged as an age issue."<sup>53</sup>

What's more, the rule made simply no sense; before this rule was announced and, later, mandated in the following 2005–2006 season—from 2002 until the mandate—the NBA had seen its best transition of young players from high school to the professional ranks ever. Amare Stoudemire of the Phoenix Suns won Rookie of the Year during the 2002–2003 season, the first player ever to win the award straight out of high school. Dwight Howard entered the draft in 2004 and became the youngest player ever in league history to average ten rebounds a game and the youngest player to have twenty rebounds in one game eventually earning Howard a spot on the All-NBA Rookie First Team in the 2004–2005 season.<sup>54</sup> Stoudemire and Howard were big men with a lethal combination of strength and quickness never seen before in the history of the league at such a young age. Carmelo Anthony of the Denver Nuggets entered the NBA draft after one year in college, which saw him as a freshmen lead his team, the Syracuse Orangemen of Syracuse University, to victory in the NCAA men's basketball championship in 2003, giving Syracuse its only national basketball championship in school history.

After Anthony proved he was superior to the college game, he entered the NBA draft the following season. The argument can be made that Anthony is an honorary straight-out-of-high-school product because of his sheer dominance his one freshman season. In his sixth game as a rookie, Anthony scored thirty points, making him the second-youngest player in the history of the NBA to accomplish such a feat.<sup>55</sup> Anthony's sensational rookie season earned him a spot on the All-NBA Rookie First Team during the 2003–2004 season.

Then of course, there is LeBron James, also known as "King James" and "The Chosen One," who plays for the Cleveland Cavaliers. James is not only the best NBA player to come straight out of high school, but arguably the best rookie to come into the league ever. James, who won Rookie of

the Year in the 2003–2004 season, the same year Anthony entered the draft, is a combination of the two greatest basketball players of all time: Jordan and Magic. James can fly in the air and perform an amazing dunk like Jordan and can run the floor and pass the ball with the same efficiency as Johnson.

The first decade of the new millennium has seen the best group of high school kids enter the NBA draft in the history of the league, but the public is told that the talent level is declining. This concept of the age limit is absurd, racist, and groundless.

As Operation Fahrenheit Ron Artest continues, Stern gave out the infamous dress-code rule. When Allen Iverson told the world, “Michael Jordan is not my hero,” in the same breath he said, “None of my heroes wear suits.”<sup>56</sup> Jordan was known as a great player, an endorsement monster, and a very well-dressed man. Jordan was known for wearing three-piece suits to and from games. When the media followed Jordan going to and coming from his locker room after a game, the cameras always traveled up and down Jordan’s six-foot, six-inch frame, emphasizing his attire.

This again, was the image narrative that befitted the Civil Rights legacy: not only was certain behavior necessary to gain entrance into the mainstream, but certain dress. This demonstrated good manners and a sensibility of putting one’s best foot forward in terms of personality, style, and “white mainstream protocol.”

Iverson’s cornrows, tattoos, and hip-hop mannerisms spread like wildfire across the NBA, influencing the regulations the NBA was handing out, including the dress code. Iverson knew it and spoke out on the issue: “They’re targeting guys who dress like me, guys who dress hip-hop. Put a murderer in a suit and he’s still a murderer. It sends a bad message to kids.” Iverson continued, “I don’t think it’s good for the league—it kind of makes it fake.”<sup>57</sup> Not only was the NBA targeting players who, as Iverson said, “dress like me”—the rule was targeted directly at Iverson’s persona and style in revenge toward what he had transfigured the league into.

Though Jordan had departed from the league, hip-hop throughout the late 90s and into the early millennium began conquering the popular culture scene around the globe. Boyd clarifies this position:

Hip hop has now become a force that operates on a global scale. Having started in the post-industrial rubble of the South Bronx and then moved through America and into the global cultural economy, hip hop has become a form of expression that maintains these roots but also can be made specific to the culture appropriating it. It has moved from Frisco to Maine, and then on to Spain, from the state’s capital to the nation’s capital. . . . Hip hop is worldwide.<sup>58</sup>

Iverson and the current breed of players inhabiting the league were no different in their hip-hop appeal. In 2001, Iverson's

sneakers were outselling all others; in the week ending June 3, retailers took in roughly \$1 million in Iverson jerseys sales alone, far outdistancing all other athletes. . . . Reebok had announced that Iverson had boosted their sales by 20 percent during the first half of the year. Thanks to Iverson . . . Reebok posted second quarter earnings of \$14 million.<sup>59</sup>

Though there has been a bevy of articles about how attendance in the NBA is declining in the post-Jordan era, the numbers say otherwise. After the 2006–2007 season was finally complete, the NBA had just recorded its fourth straight year of record-setting attendance for regular season and playoff games.<sup>60</sup> In addition, hip-hop has taken over the international market as well; as Boyd has said, “Hip-hop is worldwide,” which can explain why in recent years Allen Iverson has had the number-two selling jersey in China.<sup>61</sup>

Hip-hop is the reason why the NBA continues to be a billion-dollar industry; Jordan and Magic might have started it, but hip-hop is finishing it. Stern and his Republican officials are no different than music corporate moguls who reap billions from hip-hop but don't like or respect the music.

During the first season of the dress code mandate, players began wearing long black tights that covered their legs, which had the appearance of long black pantyhose under their shorts. The purpose of the tights was to keep players' legs warm and to help players with nagging injuries related to their knees and ankles—Stern banned them. This was consistent with enforcing the dress code he imposed earlier this same 2005–2006 season.<sup>62</sup>

In the 2006–2007 season, Stern put into place the “No Tolerance Rule,” which forbade players to display any amount of outward emotion such as slamming the ball down on the court or expressing frustration or anger by any type of minute bodily or hand gesture. This delegated unprecedented power to NBA referees.

Throughout the history of the NBA, there has always been a proverbial line that players could not cross: physical altercations with an opposing player, or the constant verbal battering of a referee. If a player did cross that conceptual line of conduct, it would result in a technical foul or an ejection from the game. But now, if a player displays any small amount of frustration, even if directed at his own teammate or himself, this is forbidden by the new league mandate of “no tolerance.”

This power went to absurd levels when Memphis Grizzlies star Rudy Gay was playing the Sacramento Kings. Gay, driving to the basket for a layup or dunk, was fouled; when he landed, he twisted his ankle. Hobbled on one leg, he slammed the ball down on the floor and was given a technical foul. Anyone who witnessed this game could see that Gay slammed the ball not

in anger, but in pain. Bill Walton, who was commentating the game for ESPN, and who was Mr. Anti-Establishment in the 1970s with his views on politics and social justice as a white collegiate superstar and young NBA star, agreed with Gay's receiving the technical.

The "No Tolerance Rule" sounds similar to the "Zero Tolerance" policies that Republican conservatives enacted in the mid-1990s, a mandate that gave "carte blanche" to law enforcement to do what they saw fit in arresting someone who disobeyed the law. Many social and political scholars and experts believed this policy was targeted toward young black male youths in American schools and in society at large.<sup>63</sup> The "Zero Tolerance" policies also increased the number of young black men incarcerated by a wicked and unfair prison system.

Stern and his Republican officials are creating the same environment for NBA players that young black men endure in society, where their incarceration rate is higher than their rate of college enrollment. Stern has been given "carte blanche" to do as he pleases with current NBA players—with media and public approval.

## TAKING STANDS AND THE IMAGE OF POLITICS

Political and social activism is not just the sole property of the Civil Rights movement. Hip-hop has had its share of political and social activism in recent years, as Jeff Chang, author of *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, expounds:

They'll say that when you stand Russell Simmons, P-Diddy . . . against Rosa Parks, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., there's no comparison. There isn't. It's comparing apples to oranges. . . . Hip hop activists and organizers have elected and deposed politicians, stopped multi-million-dollar juvenile jails from being built, convinced taxpayers to vote for millions in youth services, and much more. They're just not marching on Washington. Hip hop activists and organizers fight below the radar . . . and the mainstream media never talks about it."<sup>64</sup>

And black players who represent hip-hop are no different. Detroit Piston star Rasheed Wallace, another hip-hop NBA athlete, played for the Portland Trailblazers for eight seasons. During his time in Portland, Wallace even deejayed for a hip-hop radio station called Portland's Jammin' 95.5.<sup>65</sup> Wallace, who is known for his many tattoos and tendency to wear cornrows, is also known for his outspokenness on issues concerning the NBA.

In addition, he is known for his "verbal battering" and excessive "bodily and hand gestures" towards NBA referees, which have been the basis for several technical fouls (he broke the league record for most technical fouls in

the 1999–2000 season).<sup>66</sup> Wallace constantly and openly expresses his dismay toward referees while knowing the consequences of receiving a technical foul or of being ejected from a game. It can be argued that his behavior toward referees is a refusal to surrender to the NBA establishment. As the *Detroit Free Press* has stated, if “Sheed believes there is a questionable call, he must protest.”<sup>67</sup>

Wallace and the fight against the NBA establishment came to light when he decided to verbalize his disdain about what the NBA does to control young black players. Wallace passionately said, “I ain’t no dumb-ass nigger out here. I’m not like a whole bunch of these young boys out here who get caught up and captivated into the league. No, I see behind the lines. I see behind the false screens. I know what this business is all about.” Wallace continued on his rampage toward Stern and the NBA: “In my opinion, they just want to draft niggers who are dumb and dumber. . . . They don’t know the real business, and they don’t see behind the charade. . . . They look at Black athletes like we’re dumb-ass niggers. It’s as if we’re just going to shut up, sign for the money, and do what they tell us.”<sup>68</sup>

Wallace wanted to make clear that he was well aware of how Stern and league officials desire that young black players be obedient to and cooperative with the status quo of sports. As Wallace states, he knows “what this business is all about.”

Because of Rasheed Wallace’s well-known publicized temper toward referees, and his inclination toward persistently receiving technical fouls, Stern made a league rule stating that any player receiving sixteen technical fouls in a season shall be suspended for one game. This rule was systematic manipulation by Stern intended to make NBA life difficult for Wallace because he chooses to be outspoken about the state of the league that is slowly but relentlessly infringing on the civil liberties of players.

Wallace’s emotional outbursts toward referees and his willingness to speak against NBA policies is also the inspiration behind the “No-Tolerance Rule,” a policy designed to make players behave on the court and a symbolic gesture at making players submissive off the court.

Jermaine O’Neal, power forward and center for the Indiana Pacers, one of the leading figures of the “Palace Brawl,” and a representative of the new hip-hop ballplayer who also sports tattoos and cornrows (although he cut his cornrows off during the 2007–2008 season), is known not only for defending himself against raucous fans but for his candid views on repressive NBA policies. O’Neal entered the NBA draft straight from high school in 1996, the same year Iverson entered the draft. When the age limit became official, O’Neal spoke about the unfairness of the rule:

As a black guy, you kind of think race is the reason why it’s coming up. You don’t hear about it in baseball or hockey. To say you have to

be twenty, twenty-one, to get in the league—it's unconstitutional. If I can go to the U.S. Army and fight the war at eighteen, why can't you play basketball for forty-eight minutes and then go home. I know that the fact is that thirteen-, fourteen-, fifteen-year-olds are able to decide whether they want to go play a pro sport, but it's no issue. This has been going on for twenty, thirty years in other sports, but it's still no issue. And those sports are predominantly white sports. That's what all I'm saying. When he compared it between those other sports and basketball, that was the comparison between the sports that have predominantly white players and another sport, in basketball, that has predominantly black players. But it didn't come out like that. Today it came out that I was playing the race card. I'm not playing the race card. I'm talking about the facts. I'm talking about these kids having the opportunity to excel at life.<sup>69</sup>

O'Neal wanted to formulate clearly that he didn't comprehend why was it so egregious for young NBA players to come straight from high school while mostly white populated sports such as hockey and tennis see teenagers turn pro annually. And many times, as O'Neal said, the teenagers are "thirteen-, fourteen-, fifteen-year-olds." O'Neal also found it reprehensible that it was acceptable for an eighteen-year-old kid to lose his life if he was a member of the military in battlefield trenches, but unacceptable for him to "play basketball for forty-eight minutes and then go home." But the excessive self-righteousness of Magic Johnson chose to differ. After O'Neal articulated his valid and compelling remarks, Magic Johnson said the next day on the TNT network's *Inside the NBA*, in so many words, that O'Neal shouldn't make this about racism, "because the league is suffering." Magic wasn't talking out of concern for O'Neal or, perhaps, even about the state of the league, but out of jealousy and egomania. The league has made good without the services of him or Jordan both in its talent and attendance, but he makes the inaccurate claim that "the league is suffering."

Johnson's remarks undermined O'Neal's fight to challenge this oppressive and illogical rule. What was interesting about Magic's remarks was that his career rival, Hall-of-Famer and allegorical white hope of the 1980s, Larry Bird, said on an ESPN special that he believed that there should be more white players in the NBA because white fans need a player to whom to relate.<sup>70</sup> When Bird made this outrageous remark, Magic, who was sitting right next to him, said not a word. But Magic somehow found the energy to silence O'Neal instead of challenging Bird on his racist comments. This compares to late Civil Rights activist C. Delores Tucker (who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights struggles)<sup>71</sup> and her

national campaign against hip-hop during the early part of the 1990s, as part of which she worked side by side with “enemies of black America.”<sup>72</sup>

Tucker aligned herself with former United States Secretary of Education William Bennett, who intimated on his syndicated radio show in 2005 that reducing crime in America would be possible if one were to “abort every black baby in this country.”<sup>73</sup> That Tucker aligned herself with such a brutal racist as Bennett paralleled Johnson’s remarks when he undercut O’Neal’s powerful statement, siding with Stern and his racist and groundless mandate.

## MICHAEL JORDAN VS. HIP-HOP

O’Neal, Wallace, and Iverson do more than speak truthfully and powerfully against NBA policies that affect their livelihood on and off the court; they also spend time helping disenfranchised communities. O’Neal does community work with the Indianapolis Housing Authority. He contributes \$25,000 for clothes yearly. O’Neal also began “a program for strengthening father-son relationships by sponsoring nights out at the Pacers game. Working with the local housing authority was important to him, he said, because he had grown up in the projects, abandoned by his father at birth.”<sup>74</sup>

With all this work in the community, O’Neal is still perplexed by people’s perception of him and the rest of the league: “People say the league is too hip hop, too out of control. I don’t understand that. I have tattoos but I care about people.”<sup>75</sup> Rasheed Wallace performs work in the community as well and has done charitable work throughout his career. He began the Rasheed Wallace Foundation in 1997 to provide help in Portland, Philadelphia, and Durham, North Carolina, to underprivileged communities.<sup>76</sup>

Wallace’s foundation has sponsored annual coat drives and food drives and provided grants for inner city schools and recreation centers. Allen Iverson held Summer Celebrity Classics in his hometown of Hampton, Virginia, to give back to the Boys and Girls club he attended when he was a small child.<sup>77</sup> Despite the charitable efforts made by Iverson, Wallace, and O’Neal, Jordan continues to criticize “the state of the game.”

In an interview on *60 Minutes*, Jordan complained that “too many young players are overpaid and overindulged, affecting their work ethic” and the game he loves so much. Jordan continued, “I think the game is being cheated because of the success that’s being given prior to them earning it. Simple as that.”<sup>78</sup>

In this interview, he told the world again how the current players take advantage of what he brought into the league; in Jordan’s mind, “the game is being cheated” instead of the players becoming targets of the systematic policies and attacks that Stern and his officials transport into the league.

In a interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, a show televised after his *60 Minutes* interview—both appearances in October 2005, after the mandates of the dress code and the age limit were made official to the public—Jordan went on another rampage:

You know, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Charles Barkley, we earned what we got. That means when the corporate people came to us—and I don't mean to be mean to young kids . . . because I think it's something that they have to learn and hopefully they will learn that, is that, when corporate America came to us—we had a game that could validate their admiration. . . . So in essence, you're paying the kid off the potential.<sup>79</sup>

And then, in a complicit tone, Oprah asked, “You don't think that's good?” Jordan readily responded, “No. Because I think it sets bad work ethic. When you get something so easily, you're not going to work as hard.”<sup>80</sup> The position is highly illogical, because all players, when they enter the league, are paid according to what they can potentially do, whether by team contract or endorsement.

Sometimes a player can fulfill his potential and become a productive force in the league, a few even becoming superstars like Jordan. But most players don't fulfill their potential and quickly become less-than-average players by either being traded from team to team throughout their lackluster career or simply by being cut from a team within the first few years of their NBA career, never to return to the league again. This has always been the case, whether before, during, or after Jordan's reign. This is a sad commentary on the mindset of Jordan and Magic, who are so inundated with their own legacy that they will ignore or even agree with the abusive policies that Stern implements to control young players.

If some players are worried more about their paychecks than about their “work ethic,” then Jordan was the catalyst of this supercilious thought process; as Araton put it, “he failed to recognize his role in creating the problem.”<sup>81</sup> It's ironic that the man who said “Republicans buy sneakers, too,” finds himself worried about the advantages that young players have with “corporate America.”

During the middle of the 2004–2005 season, the Detroit Pistons were honored at the White House for winning the NBA championship the previous season. When Rasheed Wallace was asked about how he felt about meeting Republican president George Bush, Wallace said, “I don't have shit to say to him, I didn't vote for him.”<sup>82</sup> Wallace would rather publicly show his disregard for Bush and deal with the consequences than blurt out, “Republicans buy sneakers, too.” Wallace's statement about Bush showed his character of commitment to his beliefs, but



Jordan in his statement showed his character of commitment to the Nike brand.

As Rhoden eloquently puts it, “Had [Jordan] said jump, had he said protest, most athletes would have jumped; most would have protested. Instead, Jordan said, ‘Be Like Mike.’”<sup>83</sup> If there is anyone that these young players are trying to imitate when they are inundated with their own ego and multimillion-dollar lifestyle, it’s Jordan.

In spite of Jordan’s apolitical behavior, he does know the significance of racism. Rhoden in *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* had a brief conversation and encounter with Jordan in the fall of 1997 after Jordan had won his fifth championship for the Chicago Bulls the previous season. Jordan and Rhoden were talking about long-time New York Knick and basketball play-by-play commentator Marv Albert and his sex scandal, which was all over the media airwaves at the time. Albert was on trial for felony charges of forcible sodomy—rape. But after Albert eventually settled the case in court, he was still allowed to continue a career in broadcasting.

Discussing this issue with Rhoden, Jordan said, “You know what they would have done if that was me?” Rhoden and Jordan discussed and agreed that Albert shouldn’t be allowed to continue a broadcasting career, especially because O. J. Simpson’s job of being a football commentator for NBC was taken away, even after Simpson was acquitted on all murder charges.<sup>84</sup>

Rhoden was excited at the thought that the most famous athlete in the world still knew his place in a racist society, “At that moment we became like two black men—Brothers—talking about the racism that most of us take for granted as part of life in the United States.” Rhoden continues, “I was encouraged at least that Jordan was fully aware of the double standards even at his level.”<sup>85</sup>

Rhoden realized that Jordan, knowing that racism was still a relentless part of black existence in America, chose to take the Civil Rights approach, entering the mainstream and maintaining a lifestyle of money, assimilation, and silence. Rhoden elucidates: “He was like most African Americans, playing the game, seeing racism and sidestepping it, grumbling about it under his breath, but pushing it to one side in order to reap the full benefits of a multiracial society.”<sup>86</sup>

It was clear that Jordan knew the consequences of the racial double standard that is given to black athletes and celebrities but chose to grumble about it “under his breath,” while frequently finding the courage to openly complain about young black NBA players.

Again, Jordan’s opinions are indicative of the Civil Rights generation and the beneficiaries who criticize the hip-hop generation for not being thankful enough for what was carved out for them. Hip-hop exposes the truth—sometimes the ugly truth—of urban street life in America,

simultaneously refusing to adopt Civil Rights mannerisms in order to succeed in the mainstream.

Jordan is the symbolic fulfillment of the Civil Rights movement, which had assimilation, accommodation, and mainstream access as its ultimate goals. Hip-hop NBA players are symbolic of the current era, in which the ultimate goal is nonconformity and cultural insurgency. Jordan is also symbolic of the attitudes that align with the Civil Rights movement, whose disrespect toward the hip-hop generation is shortsighted and, in some ways, envious.

Combine this attitude with the persistent racism directed toward the hip-hop generation by the likes of the mainstream media, law enforcement, the prison system, and David Stern—and this creates divide-and-conquer scenarios in the black community with no end in sight. Jordan's and the Civil Rights collective's complete disregard of the positive strides hip-hop is making in society and sports with its individual presence, outspokenness, and work in the community is appalling and regressive. This schism of social ideals between the generations only adds another chapter to the overall plight of African American existence in sports and in society.

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# **“Moving the Chains”: The Evolution of the African American Quarterback in Professional Football**

*Brandon E. Martin*

In 2003, Rush Limbaugh offered the following remarks on ESPN’s NFL pre-game show: “The media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well. There is a little hope invested in Donovan McNabb, and he got a lot of credit for the performance of his team that he didn’t deserve”.<sup>1</sup> Limbaugh’s insidious argument that McNabb was overrated alluded to an ever-pressing theme in American society—that African American men in America must incessantly prove themselves in a culture perpetually questioning their societal worth. More specific to McNabb, Limbaugh’s reflection epitomizes the stereotype of African American quarterbacks not having the skills requisite to hold what is arguably the most coveted position in the world of sports. As distinguished professor Harry Edwards contended, “African American quarterbacks are on an 18-inch chain. The minute they go off the expected trail or path, they are ridiculed and jerked back.”<sup>2</sup>

The journey for African Americans playing quarterback began in the early 1900s. In 1918, Frederick (Fritz) Pollard of Brown University made his mark in college football. Before the forward pass was legal, the ball was hiked to the “back” or “signal caller,” who negotiated behind his blockers against the defense at the goal line.<sup>3</sup> Pollard was considered one of the best signal callers of his time. Although he was a successful signal caller, many football historians are hesitant to call him the first African American quarterback, because he did not demonstrate all of the skill sets of traditional quarterbacks.

Additionally, Wilmeth Sidat-Singh was a standout quarterback from Syracuse University in 1937 and 1938. Often, after learning that Sidat-Singh

was African American, teams refused to let him play. To keep quarterbacks such as Sidat-Singh out of the NFL, the NFL operated on under the guise of a “Gentleman’s Agreement” from 1934 to 1946 that kept the league all-white, just like professional baseball.<sup>4</sup> This was indeed a dark period in NFL history.

Decades later, African American football players were overrepresented in certain positions—running back, wide receiver, defensive back, and other roles that many white coaches did not feel required “thinking,” such as quarterback and middle linebacker. Many academicians have referred to the overrepresentation of racial groups at particular positions in team sports as “staking.” Staking is essentially connected with popular beliefs about skin color and a combination of such traits as intelligence, leadership, motivation, dependability, jumping, and running.<sup>5</sup> For years, African American football players in college were told that they could not read defenses, were spoiled and undisciplined, had the propensity to violate the law, and were inclined toward the cardinal sin: interracial affairs with white women.<sup>6</sup> Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown was harassed frequently at Syracuse University because of his preference for dating white coeds. Brown explained, “I felt like I had promptly been targeted as a trouble-maker and threat to Caucasian women.”<sup>7</sup> No one, however, questioned his natural ability to run the football.

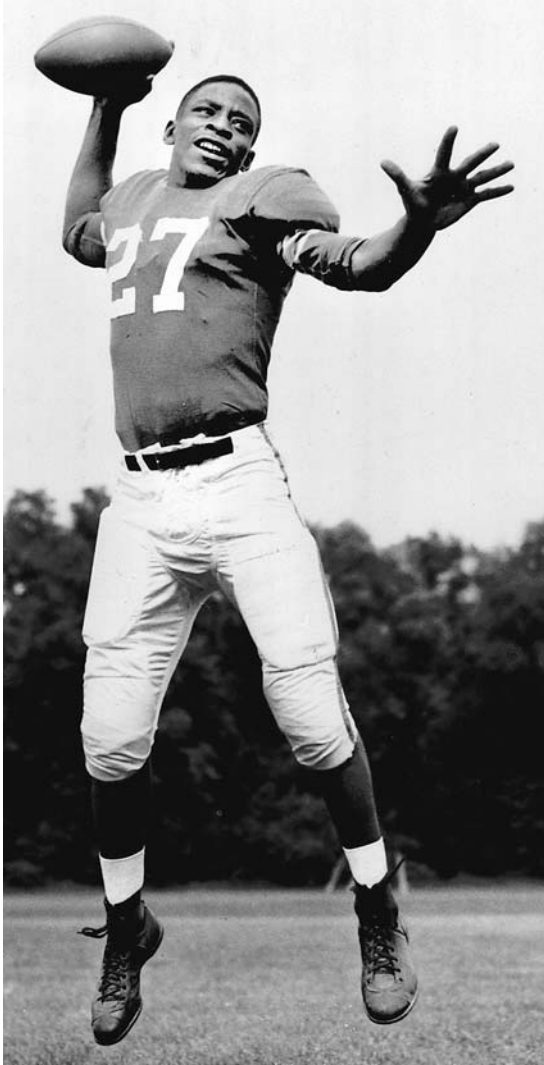
Today, the African American NFL quarterback is represented by varied skill sets and panache. Some possess remarkable arm strength and high levels of football acumen; others are equipped with overall playmaking ability and superior gamesmanship. In 2006, the top five African American quarterbacks were Donovan McNabb, Michael Vick, Vince Young, Steve McNair, and David Garrard. The combined averages and statistics of this group are nothing short of sensational. The group averaged 2,421 yards passed, 15.2 touchdowns, and 10.6 interceptions.<sup>8</sup> Aside from having an average quarterback rating of 80.2, their respective teams combined for a record of 9.2 wins.<sup>9</sup> Given these astounding statistics, it is safe to conclude that the African American quarterback has moved beyond the days when their white counterparts were deemed the quintessential models of excellence at that position.

## THE GENESIS OF ACHIEVEMENT (1950–1970)

Willie “The Pro” Thrower is regarded by many sport historians as the Jackie Robinson of professional football. In 1953, Thrower became the first African American to play quarterback in the National Football League (NFL). (A year prior, Thrower had become the first African American to play quarterback in the Big 10 conference.) As a member of the Chicago Bears, Thrower completed three of eight passes for twenty-seven yards



**Michigan State quarterback Willie Thrower in 1951.**



*AP Photo*

against the San Francisco 49'ers.<sup>10</sup> After making his debut against the San Francisco 49'ers, Thrower never played in another NFL game.

Born March 22, 1930 in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, Thrower never had his name mentioned in the long lineage of white quarterbacks from western Pennsylvania quarterbacks—Johnny Unitas, Joe Namath, Joe Montana, Dan Marino, and Jim Kelly.<sup>11</sup> Hall of Fame quarterback George

Blanda reported that “Thrower could throw the football seventy yards on a line. He was more than just a guy who could throw, he was a passer who could fit the ball through the eye of a needle if he needed to.”<sup>12</sup> Although Thrower’s talents were evident too coaches and players alike, Thrower was cut by the Chicago Bears before the 1954 NFL season. After being snubbed by other NFL franchises, he decided to continue his football career in the Canadian Football League (CFL). Thrower played three seasons for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers before retiring in 1957.

Willie Thrower’s historic accomplishment in 1953 remains uncelebrated by many in the football community. His career has been overshadowed by the emerging trend of African American quarterbacks in the NFL over the past few decades. Nevertheless, Thrower’s monumental exploit will forever be considered the “genesis of opportunity” for African American quarterbacks on all competitive levels.

Around this same period, George Taliaferro, an African American quarterback from Indiana University started two games as a T-formation quarterback for the Baltimore Colts. Unlike Thrower, Taliaferro was a big, strong runner who was more comfortable playing quarterback in a “shotgun” fashion. After starting two games as quarterback, Taliaferro primarily played tailback and only attempted two more passes in his professional career.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Taliaferro led Indiana University to the Big 10 championship in 1945. While at Indiana University, Taliaferro was known for his superb play on the field and his leadership in gaining African American students access to campus and public facilities during the 1940s.<sup>14</sup> After a stellar career at Indiana University, in 1945 Taliaferro was the first African American picked in the NFL Draft by the Chicago Bears in the thirteenth round. He was selected for the highly esteemed Pro Bowl three years straight—1951, 1952, and 1953. Taliaferro finished his career with 61 games played, 47 completions, 6 touchdowns, and 151 interceptions. As a prolific rusher, Taliaferro gained 1,794 yards with 10 touchdowns.<sup>15</sup>

Though undersized at 5 feet, 11 inches and 170 pounds, Marlin “The Magician” Briscoe was a productive African American quarterback both at the collegiate and professional levels. Briscoe was named “the Magician” because of his elusive running style and ability to make plays on the move. A standout at the University at Omaha, Briscoe rushed for 1,318 yards, passed 4,935, and completed 333 of 609 passes for 52 touchdowns with an accuracy average of 54 percent.<sup>16</sup> Despite his impressive play as quarterback in college, Briscoe was still considered an “athlete” by many of the white professional scouts and coaches of this era. Therefore, the Denver Broncos drafted him as a defensive back in 1968. Briscoe accepted his role on defense but still desired to play quarterback. After the starting quarterback, Steve Tensi, broke his collarbone, Briscoe was given the opportunity to play quarterback in the third game of the 1968 season. After leading his team

to victory, Briscoe started seven of the next eleven games of the season. Briscoe finished the 1968 season with a rookie record of 1,589 yards passing, 14 touchdowns, and 308 rushing yards.<sup>17</sup> The following season, Briscoe was informed by his coach, Louis Saban, that he would no longer play quarterback and was abruptly released from the team. Briscoe was later signed by the Miami Dolphins as a wide receiver.

### **BUILDING THE FOUNDATION (1970–1980)**

The merger between the NFL and AFL in 1969 marked the beginning of change in professional football. The merger driven by the New York Jets win over the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III the previous year brought

**Former NFL great Warren Moon poses with his bust after enshrinement in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, 2006.**



*AP Photo/Mark Duncan*

exposure, which led to a large television contract for the league—thus professional football emerged as an “American Institution”.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the 1970s, underscored a surge of successful African American players in professional football. African American players were finally considered valuable athletes on both sides of the ball. Unlike the early years—of Thrower, Taliaferro, and Briscoe—African American players were now more apt to combat longstanding stereotypes of being intellectually dense, undisciplined, and childish. African American players as a group were determined to eradicate the existing “caricatures” that white America had engendered for them in society.

After the tenure of Marlon Briscoe, James “Shack” Harris perpetuated the lineage of African American quarterbacks in the NFL. Before being drafted in 1969 by the Buffalo Bills, Harris was a standout quarterback at Grambling College (later changed to Grambling State University), where he passed for 1,972 yards and twenty-one touchdowns.<sup>19</sup> Around this same time, Grambling College had sent more players to the NFL than any other small college and was second only to Notre Dame in the total number of players drafted.<sup>20</sup> Unlike many of his African American contemporaries, Harris was a “pocket passer” with laser-sharp accuracy. Because of his history of knee injuries, Harris was not fortunate enough to have a dual attack as had most African American quarterbacks of this period. Additionally, Harris was considered a more traditional quarterback, his 6-foot, 4-inch, 210-pound frame being comparable to other white quarterbacks such as Joe Namath.

Although Harris was drafted as a quarterback in 1969, he did not receive a playbook for the upcoming season. The Buffalo Bills coaching staff told Harris that the playbooks would not be ready until the beginning of training camp. When Harris arrived at training camp, he discovered that Dennis Shaw, a white quarterback, had received a playbook one month before training camp. While with the Buffalo Bills, Harris battled injuries and languished on the bench behind Jack Kemp and Tom Flores. He only appeared in eighteen games from 1969 to 1971.<sup>21</sup> Louis Saban, the same coach that released Marlon Briscoe from the Denver Broncos, waived Harris in 1971.

In 1973, Harris earned a roster spot with the Los Angeles Rams. In 1974, Harris became the first African American quarterback to start an NFL playoff game. Moreover, Harris was the first African American quarterback to play in the Pro Bowl for the 1974–1975 season.<sup>22</sup> After two additional years as the Rams’ starting quarterback, Harris was signed by the San Diego Chargers. Harris played for the Chargers through the 1979–1980 season. Thus, to say that Harris was a trailblazer for future African American quarterbacks is an understatement.

Aside from Harris, in 1975, there were four other African American quarterbacks in the NFL—J. J. Jones, Richard Todd, Parnell Dickinson,

and Joe Gilliam. J. J. Jones was from Fisk University and was drafted in 1972 by the New York Jets as the number-two quarterback behind Joe Namath. Three years later, Richard Todd, a highly touted quarterback from the University of Alabama, was also drafted by the New York Jets. On the heels of much contention and disdain about the presence of two African American quarterbacks, Jones was released from the team shortly after the preseason. Parnell Dickinson was an accomplished quarterback prospect from Mississippi Vocational College. After much criticism from the local media, he was named the backup quarterback behind Steve Spurrier with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Of all of the African American quarterbacks in the mid-1970's, Joe "Jefferson Street" Gilliam was reported to be the most talented. Gilliam played college football at Tennessee State University, where he led his team to an impressive 21–1 record. He was an All-American in 1970–1971 and broke every major record at the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) level. Gilliam was given the name "Jefferson Street" after fans shouted his name profusely along Jefferson Street, a major road in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>23</sup> Unlike his white counterparts, who were drafted with lofty expectations, Gilliam was viewed as another African American quarterback whose career would be impeded by the complexities of defenses and the mental demands of the position. Furthermore, Gilliam was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers, who had the coveted Terry Bradshaw and Terry Hanratty. Given this, no one expected Gilliam to be anything nearing productive as a professional quarterback.

After more distinguished players such as Terry Bradshaw went on strike, Gilliam led the Pittsburgh Steelers to a 6–0 record in preseason play, completing 75 of 124 passes for 1,175 yards and 11 touchdowns.<sup>24</sup> When the other quarterbacks returned from the strike, Gilliam retained his starting position for the first six games with a record of 4–1–1.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, Bradshaw returned as the starter and led the Pittsburgh Steelers to a Super Bowl victory. Reports indicate that Gilliam was never embraced by the Pittsburgh community in the 1970s. He received a plethora of death threats and hate mail while he was a member of the team.<sup>26</sup> Strained under the enormous criticism and pressure, Gilliam began to use drugs, which affected his professional career. After a transient career in the NFL and a dreadful battle with drugs, Gilliam lived homeless for a short period. Sadly, he died of a massive heart attack in December of 2000.<sup>27</sup>

There were few successes among the African American trailblazers of this period; certainly none of them came close to the greatness of Warren Moon. In Moon's seventeen-year career in the NFL, he established himself as one of the best quarterbacks in the history of the organization. Moon's illustrious career undoubtedly left an indelible print in the record books of the NFL. Notwithstanding the multitude of questions and doubts regarding

his intelligence, leadership ability, and gamesmanship, Moon proved to be an undeniable force in the Canadian Football League (CFL) and the NFL.

Moon's early football career began with several pitfalls and hardships. After transferring from West Los Angeles in 1975, Moon attended the University of Washington. Much to the chagrin of alumni, fans, and the administration, Moon was named the starting quarterback by head coach Don James. The Washington faithful were outraged that James named a rookie African American quarterback to lead their floundering football team. After a couple tumultuous years, Moon led his team to the 1978 Rose Bowl for the first time in fourteen years.<sup>28</sup> He was named the game's Most Valuable Player because of his two stellar touchdown runs and his third-quarter twenty-eight-yard scoring pass to wide receiver Robert "Spider" Gaines.<sup>29</sup>

Although Moon exhibited a powerful arm and superb accuracy, NFL scouts were not confident in his skills at quarterback, and he was not selected in the 1978 NFL draft. As a result, Moon signed with the Edmonton Eskimos in the Canadian Football League. In six seasons with Edmonton, he completed 1,369 of 2,832 passes for 21,228 yards.<sup>30</sup> In 1983, Moon set a new season record with 5,648 passing yards, achieved a single-game mark of 555 yards, and was named the CFL's Most Valuable Player.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in 1984, Moon was signed by the Houston Oilers as a free agent. Determined to silence his longstanding critics, Moon led the Houston Oilers to seven straight playoff appearances and was selected to the Pro Bowl from 1988 to 1994.<sup>32</sup> After his time with the Houston Oilers, Moon played for the Minnesota Vikings (1994–1997), the Seattle Seahawks (1997–1998), and the Kansas City Chiefs (1998–2000). When Moon retired at the age of forty-four, he had thrown for 49,000 yards and 391 touchdowns in the NFL.<sup>33</sup> He also appeared in nine Pro Bowls (1988–1995, 1997). Moreover, Moon's NFL and CFL combined statistics are nearly unmatched in professional football annals: 5,357 completions in 9,205 attempts for 70,553 yards and 435 touchdowns.<sup>34</sup> Only Dan Marino and John Elway have completed more passes in NFL history.

The apex of Moon's professional career occurred in 2006, when he was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame. Moon became the first African American quarterback and undrafted player to be honored as part of this esteemed fraternity. On this momentous day, Moon contended, "To be the first African American quarterback inducted into the Hall of Fame . . . all African American quarterbacks who played before me should share this. I don't want to make this a racial thing, but I think it shows that we have arrived at the pinnacle of our sport." (Seattle Seahawk Press Release). Moon's success has paved the way for current African American NFL quarterbacks such as Steve McNair, Donte Culpepper, Donovan McNabb, and Vince Young. Thus, Moon's resolve to excel at quarterback and determination to

combat unsubstantiated stereotypes has been instrumental in debunking misconceptions about African Americans playing quarterback at all competitive levels.

### **THE ERA OF MOBILITY (1980–1990)**

In the 1980’s, the demands of the quarterback position changed considerably. With defensive players such as Reggie White (Philadelphia Eagles) and Lawrence Taylor (New York Giants) dominating the game with their

**Washington Redskins quarterback Doug Williams is about to pass during the first quarter of Super Bowl XXII against the Denver Broncos in 1988.**



*AP Photo/Elise Amendola*

speed, tenacity, and superb athleticism, NFL quarterbacks were required to make more plays on the run. Defensive coordinators engendered sophisticated schemes to confuse the quarterback and divert him away from the traditional “pocket” model. The emergence of the West Coast offense was also more conducive for more athletic quarterbacks.

Doug Williams was one of the more noteworthy African American quarterbacks of this era. Williams played in college at Grambling State for legendary coach Eddie Robinson. While at Grambling State, Williams accomplished many feats, becoming the first player from a black college to be selected to the Associated Press’s first-team All-American squad (1977) and the first African American quarterback from a black college to be picked in the first round of the NFL draft (1978).<sup>35</sup> In his senior season, Williams finished fourth in the Heisman Trophy race behind future All Pro running back Earl Campbell of the University of Texas.

After five productive seasons, Williams felt that his compensation package was not comparable with that of other successful quarterbacks in the NFL. In 1983, Williams was the forty-third highest-paid quarterback in the NFL.<sup>36</sup> While holding out for a new contract, Williams reportedly received a watermelon in the mail turned inside out with a note stating, “Throw this nigger. They might be able to catch it.”<sup>37</sup> Unable to come to financial terms with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Williams opted to sign a lucrative contract with the Oklahoma Outlaws in the United States Football League (USFL). Williams played two seasons in the USFL before returning to the NFL with the Washington Redskins in 1986.

In 1988, Williams became the first African American quarterback to lead his team to a Super Bowl victory over the formidable Denver Broncos. In the championship game, he set records for most yards passing (340), most passing yards in a quarter (240), most touchdown passes (4), and the longest completion (80 yards).<sup>38</sup> For his stellar performance, Williams was named the Most Valuable Player of the game. Legendary coach Joe Gibbs posited, “He was one of the most talented people I have ever seen. Even when he was a young player in the league, he was a natural leader.”

Another pioneering African American quarterback during this period was Randall W. Cunningham. Cunningham grew up in Santa Barbara, California, where he learned the intricacies of football from his brother, USC All-American Sam “Bam” Cunningham. As a standout quarterback at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV), Cunningham possessed a rifle arm and an uncanny ability to scramble and avoid sacks. His career statistics at UNLV were staggering. He passed for 8,290 yards with 60 touchdowns and had a punting average of 45.2 yards.<sup>39</sup> Although Cunningham had a phenomenal college career, NFL scouts were still apprehensive about his ability to play quarterback beyond the collegiate level. After much consternation among NFL coaches and scouts, Cunningham was



drafted in the second round of the 1985 draft by the Philadelphia Eagles. After Cunningham was drafted, a reporter questioned him sternly, asking, "What makes you think you're smart enough to read NFL defenses?"<sup>40</sup> At that moment, Cunningham knew that his margin for error in the NFL was narrow at best.

As a rookie, the fans and media in Philadelphia had other concerns about Cunningham. Cunningham was viewed as aloof and cocky—"a man who wanted to do his own thing." People in Philadelphia considered Cunningham "Hollywood" because he went to college in Las Vegas and because of his relationship with singer Whitney Houston. Moreover, the media did not consider his jheri curl hairstyle, gaudy fur coats, and tight jeans a part of the Philadelphian culture. Cunningham was deemed a pariah, and his early struggles did not help his cause. After a turbulent rookie season, Cunningham was demoted to third quarterback on the depth chart.

With the addition of new coach Buddy Ryan, Cunningham was revived with a new zeal to perform and prove his critics wrong. In 1987, Cunningham finished with 2,786 yards passing with 23 touchdowns and 505 yards rushing. After being named to the Pro Bowl, Cunningham passed for 3,808 yards with 24 touchdowns in the 1988–1989 season.<sup>41</sup> Subsequently, he was anointed the NFL's "Ultimate Weapon" by *Sports Illustrated* and led the Eagles back to the playoffs during the 1989–1990 season.<sup>42</sup> Cunningham soon signed a contract extension through 1995 worth between \$18 and \$22 million.

In the early 1990s, Cunningham's career was hindered by chronic injuries. In 1991, he missed fifteen games after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). Cunningham returned the following season with All Pro statistics, passing for 2,775 yards with 19 touchdowns and rushing for 549 yards.<sup>43</sup> Although Cunningham seemed to be back to true form, the Eagles struggled collectively and lost pathetically to the Dallas Cowboys in the 1992 NFL playoffs. The next season, Cunningham broke his leg after the fourth game of the season. After sitting out the remaining 1993 season, Cunningham's role was diminished and he did not demonstrate the same fervor and athleticism that hallmarked his career. Subsequently, in 1995, he lost his starting position to another African American quarterback, Rodney Peete.

After the 1995 season, Cunningham decided to retire and move his family back to Las Vegas, Nevada. He invested in a marble and granite company and was hired by TNT as a football analyst. With a healthy body and a recharged passion for the game, Cunningham returned to the NFL with the Minnesota Vikings in 1997. In 1998, Cunningham was named the starting quarterback when Brad Johnson went down with an injury. As a starter, Cunningham arguably had the best year of his illustrious career. With the

dual wide receiving threats of Chris Carter and Randy Moss, Cunningham passed for 3,704 yards with 34 touchdowns. According to his official NFL biography, Cunningham finished the 1998 season as the NFL's highest-rated passer, was named to the Pro Bowl, and was named the NFL Player of the Year for the third time in his career.

At the climax of his landmark career, Cunningham was benched in the 1999 season. After signing short-term contracts with the Dallas Cowboys and Baltimore Ravens, Cunningham retired in 2002. Cunningham will forever be respected for his ability to make electrifying plays with his wondrous mobility, his accuracy with the football, and his unwavering resolve to come back after devastating injuries. He finished his career with 29,979 yards passing and 4,928 yards rushing.<sup>44</sup> His career rushing yards are a record for NFL quarterbacks.

Cunningham's teammate Don McPherson was another African American quarterback during the 1980s. Similar to Cunningham, McPherson was resolute about proving that he was equipped with the intellect and playmaking ability to play quarterback in the NFL. McPherson was an adept scrambler with an "edge" that made him a winner. After he was drafted in 1988 McPherson reported, "I didn't want what happened to so many black quarterbacks, being moved to wide receiver or running back. I received so much disrespect before the draft after I led the nation in passing at Syracuse. They said I was too short and that my arm wasn't strong enough."<sup>45</sup> While at Syracuse, McPherson led his team to an undefeated season the year before being drafted. He also earned the Maxwell Award as the nation's top college player and the Dave O'Brien Award and Johnny Unitas Award, given to the nation's best quarterback.

In his final season at Syracuse, McPherson wrote to every NFL team and told them not to draft him if he would not have the opportunity to play quarterback. After serving as a backup quarterback for his short tenure in the NFL, McPherson remains convinced that his outspoken reverberations were perilous to his career. McPherson's commentary involving Troy Aikman did not help his cause. He explained, "If I was white and did what I did in 1987, I would be a millionaire before the draft even occurred—as was Troy Aikman the following year." A frustrated McPherson, transitioned to professional football in the Canadian Football League 1991. He retired in 1994 with the Ottawa Riders.

## THE AGE OF OPPORTUNITY (1990–PRESENT)

The 1990's marked the age of opportunity for the African American quarterback. Pioneers such as Doug Williams, Warren Moon, and Randall Cunningham were successful at demystifying the archaic commentary regarding African American quarterbacks in the NFL. In the early 1990s,

The Philadelphia Eagles’ Donovan McNabb (5) jumps over teammate Jermaine Mayberry (71) and the Washington Redskins’ Mark Carrier (27) in the first quarter, 2000.



*AP Photo/Stephen J. Boitano*

African American quarterbacks showcased a wide array of talent packages. African American quarterbacks covered the gamut in terms of what NFL teams needed—field generals who possessed speed, arm strength, poise, leadership, and intelligence. As pioneer James Harris posited, “They are not using the word black when referring to quarterbacks anymore. You are judged on your ability. It hasn’t always been that way”.<sup>46</sup>

In the mid-1990s, Steve McNair was regarded as the “ultimate threat” by several NFL scouts. A multi-sport athlete in high school, McNair always

dreamed of being a quarterback in the NFL. Although he was highly recruited by schools in the southeast to play defensive back, McNair opted to attend Alcorn State. At Alcorn State, McNair amassed staggering statistics. He passed for 16,823 yards in his collegiate career: more than any quarterback in the history of college football.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, McNair, rushed for 938 yards in his senior season at Alcorn State.<sup>48</sup> NFL scouts were impressed with all facets of his game—his ability to make plays on the move, his decision-making while pressured, and his rocket-like arm strength. Unpredictably, NFL scouts were concerned with his low-pitched voice, which could be a potential problem with cadences.<sup>49</sup> McNair soon proved that his voice would not be a factor in his performance on the field.

After his astounding collegiate career, McNair was drafted third by the Houston Oilers in 1995. Although McNair was selected high in the draft, the Houston Oiler organization felt that he needed time to learn the intricacies of playing quarterback in the NFL. As a result, McNair was subjected to a reserve role for his first two seasons. After gaining the confidence of head coach Steve Fisher in 1997, McNair seized his chance. His 2,665 yards passing were the most for the franchise since Warren Moon in 1993. McNair also led the team in rushing touchdowns and was second only to Eddie George in total rushing yards for the season.<sup>50</sup>

Upon the relocation of the Houston Oilers to Tennessee, McNair led his team to the AFC Championship and to Super Bowl XXXIV in 1999. Although his team was not victorious, he was the second African American to start as quarterback in Super Bowl history. Earning the respect of fans, media, and NFL football personnel nationally, McNair was named co-Most Valuable Player for the 2003 season, along with Peyton Manning. Additionally, for his superhuman display of toughness, McNair was labeled an “Ironman” for his dogged determination to play with chronic injuries. From 1997 to 2003, McNair missed only 9 of the possible 112 regular season starts, 5 times because of back surgery.<sup>51</sup> McNair’s robustness and mind-blowing talent propelled him to be one of the best African American quarterbacks in the post-Moon and Cunningham era.

Despite McNair’s successful career with the Tennessee Titans, he was unreservedly disrespected by the organization in 2006. In April 2006, McNair was asked to not to show up for off-season workouts with the team, ostensibly because of fears that an injury would make the organization liable for his entire \$23.46 million salary cap hit for 2006, which would limit the team’s ability to sign its 2006 draft selections.<sup>52</sup> McNair signed with the Baltimore Ravens soon afterward that same year. Frustrated Ravens players—namely, Samari Rolle and Ray Lewis—were elated when they heard that McNair would aid them in their quest to win a Super Bowl. McNair was considered the ideal augmentation to a team with a formidable

defense but a dreary offense. Though McNair's impact has changed the face of the Baltimore Ravens offense, the team has yet to reach the pinnacle of their potential. In 2006, they lost to Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts in the 2006 NFL playoffs. After a disappointing loss in 2006, McNair missed most of the 2007 season because of injuries. McNair has yet to retire from professional football.

In 1998, Florida State University head coach Bobby Bowden considered Donovan McNabb the best football player in the nation. Head coach Steve Spurrier of the University of Florida offered a similar postulation, saying, "McNabb's arm and accuracy is superb. I expect him to be the first quarterback taken in the National Football League Draft".<sup>53</sup> While at Syracuse University, McNabb's dazzling game performances were nothing short of spectacular. McNabb completed his collegiate career having passed for 8,389 yards and rushing for 1,561 with 96 touchdowns.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, McNabb was named the Big East Offensive Player of the Year an unprecedented three times from 1996 to 1998.<sup>55</sup>

Aside from his excellence in football, McNabb also demonstrated his skill sets on the hardwood. As a member of the Syracuse University's men's basketball squad, McNabb made his presence felt with his athleticism and savvy play on the court. Craig Esherick, Georgetown's assistant basketball coach, remembered Syracuse's 77-74 victory in the Carrier Dome in 1997. The 6-foot, 2-inch, 220-pound McNabb manhandled a Georgetown front line that included the 6-foot, 9-inch, 290-pound center Jahidi White. McNabb scored ten points and grabbed six rebounds and blocked a shot. Esherick stated, "He came in the game and killed us. He's very strong and athletic".<sup>56</sup> McNabb decided to end his basketball pursuits after his sophomore season.

In 1999, the confident, elusive, sharp-throwing McNabb was drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles. The Philadelphia fans, having anticipated that the Eagles would select All-American Ricky Williams from Texas, booed McNabb and claimed that he would soon prove to be a "bust." Silencing his critics, McNabb shone in his first NFL start and became the first quarterback to win a first start since Mike Boryla.<sup>57</sup> McNabb's win in his first start forecasted stardom for the young quarterback from Chicago, Illinois.

Since his rookie campaign, McNabb has proved to be one of the most elite quarterbacks in NFL history. He is one of seven players in NFL history to amass over 25,000 passing yards (25,404) and over 2,900 rushing yards (2,962). McNabb is the first player in NFL history to finish a season with over thirty touchdown passes (thirty-one) and fewer than ten interceptions (eight). His touchdown-interception ratio ranks him third on the NFL's all-time list, behind Tom Brady and Steve Young. What's more, McNabb has more wins by a starting quarterback than any other player in Eagles franchise history.

After nine years of leading the Philadelphia Eagles, McNabb has endured boos from fans and harsh criticism from NFL football analysts and

has survived a plethora injuries and experienced a fallout with All Pro wide receiver Terrell Owens. Notwithstanding, McNabb has perpetuated the legacy of accomplished African American quarterbacks alike. Though his Hall of Fame status is uncertain, his impact on the gridiron remains unmatched by many quarterbacks, irrespective of era or generation.

In this new age of African American field generals, none is more explosive or athletically gifted than Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick. Vick's fluid agility, quick feet, balance, and ability to improvise outside the pocket is unparalleled when compared to his NFL peers. Given Vick's consummate skill package, it is hard to fathom that years ago, he would have been encouraged to play another position on the field. Because of the hardships of the aforementioned pioneers, football fans and supporters alike are fortunate to observe a multidimensional threat who can take them on an electrifying "journey" with each down.

Vick played college football at Virginia Tech University from 1998 to 2000. While at Virginia Tech, Vick set an NCAA record for freshmen and established single-season school records for highest yards passing per completion, highest completion percentage, and most yards per play.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, in 1999, Vick finished third in balloting for the highly esteemed Heisman Trophy, matching the highest finish ever by a freshman, according to the Virginia Tech Web site. Lastly, Vick was the first player in Division I history to win a conference Player of the Year Award in the same season he won Rookie of the Year.<sup>59</sup>

In 2001, Vick became the first African American quarterback to be the first overall pick in the NFL.<sup>60</sup> Vick saw limited action in 2001, but emerged as a bona fide superstar in 2002. He passed for 2,936 yards with 16 touchdowns and rushed for 777 yards.<sup>61</sup> After two Pro Bowl seasons, Vick was handsomely rewarded for his impact on the field. On December 23, 2004, Vick signed a ten-year contract with the Atlanta Falcons worth \$130 million, with a \$37 million signing bonus, making him the highest-paid player in NFL history.<sup>62</sup>

After years of NFL success, Vick is currently serving a twenty-three-month sentence for criminal conspiracy resulting from felonious dogfighting.<sup>63</sup> A United States federal district court convicted and sentenced him in 2007, and a 2008 trial is scheduled for Virginia state felony charges for his role in dogfighting and related gambling activity. He is being held in the United States Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas.<sup>64</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ascension of the African American quarterback represents a significant change in the way African American men are viewed in American society. For years, African American men have been stereotyped as dumb, deviant, and dangerous—a group struggling to prove their societal worth.

The representation of African American quarterbacks in both college and professional football sheds a positive light on the potential of African American men. The position of quarterback, more than any other in sports, epitomizes leadership, mental and physical prowess, and indefatigable fortitude. African American quarterbacks being afforded opportunities to exhibit these traits through athletics provides a "sense of hope" and inspiration for young African American men aspiring to succeed in a culture that oftentimes does not embrace their successes.

Although many of the African American quarterbacks have been underscored throughout history, some noteworthy pioneers remain disregarded. For instance, in 1959, Willie Wood cocaptained the University of Southern California Trojans as quarterback. Overshadowed by several of his white teammates, Wood was an elusive quarterback who was difficult to defend with his superb ability to make plays on the move. Given the historical dominance of USC, Wood's accomplishments as the first African American in school history remain unknown or devalued by many. Aside from Wood, the successes of the African American Ivy League quarterbacks in the late 1960s and early 1970s are rarely highlighted in college football history. Trailblazers such as Rob Plummer of Princeton, Rod Foster of Harvard, Marty Vaughn of Penn, and Dennis Coleman of Brown were all standouts during this period.

Because of this, the African American quarterback of today has much more to accomplish. One can only wonder whether Vince Young, quarterback for the Tennessee Titans, will perpetuate the legacy that his African American elders worked diligently to create. Similar to the pioneers before him, Young's intelligence was questioned when he reportedly scored a six out of a possible fifty points on the Wonderlic intelligence test before the 2006 NFL Draft. Any score less than fifteen is extremely low for a quarterback; most NFL teams expect players at that position to score at least twenty points. Young's score made NFL teams question whether he had the aptitude to grasp a complex playbook. Indeed, over the past two seasons, Young has been successful at removing the many doubts about his intelligence and his ability to read sophisticated defenses. However, the overarching question is whether Young's arrogance will impede his quest to be compared with the likes of Moon, Williams, and even his mentor, Steve McNair. To this end, will the conceited, egotistical "VY" get in the way of Young's apparent potential to become one of the best African American quarterbacks in NFL history?

Further, rookie quarterbacks such as JaMarcus Russell, must pay homage to the foundation that his forefathers have created for them. On September 12, 2007, Russell signed a six-year contract worth \$68 million, with \$31.5 million guaranteed. Does Russell understand the significance of Willie "The Pro" Thrower or truly value the excellence of Warren Moon?

One would only hope that Russell is playing the game for much more than fur coats, lavish vehicles, and the many women aspiring to be members of "Team Russell." In short, it is incumbent upon Russell and other young African American quarterbacks in the NFL to carry out the legacy for which their predecessors arduously paid the price.

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# African American Coaches, the NFL, and Popular Culture: Change Is the Only Constant

C. Keith Harrison

*Boxing has fallen into disfavor—into very great disfavor . . . The cause is clear: Jack Johnson . . . has out-sparred an Irishman. He did it with little brutality, the utmost fairness and great good nature. He did not “knock” his opponent senseless. Apparently he did not even try. Neither he nor his race invented prize fighting or particularly like it. Why then this thrill of national disgust? Because Johnson is Black. Of course some pretend to object to Mr. Johnson’s character. But we have yet to hear, in the case of White America, that marital troubles have disqualified prize fighters or ball players or even statesmen. It comes down, then, after all to this unforgivable Blackness.*

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*, August 1914<sup>1</sup>

On February 4, 2007, two African American male coaches made history in the National Football League on the world’s most televised event. Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith became the first two African American males to lead two NFL teams to the Super Bowl. This achievement must be put into the timeline of racial hatred and overt discrimination against African Americans and minority groups in general. Only twenty years ago (forty years after Jackie Robinson integrated major-league baseball), the following statements were made about African Americans purported lack of the “necessities” to coach, lead, or own a team:

*Ted Koppel & Al Campanis Exchange, April 16, 1989*

Koppel: Why are there no black managers, general managers, or owners? Is there still that much prejudice in baseball today?

Campanis: Well, I don't say that all of them, but they certainly are short. How many quarterbacks do you have, how many pitchers do you have that are black?

Koppel: Yeah, but I got to tell you, that sounds like the same garbage we were hearing forty years ago about players.

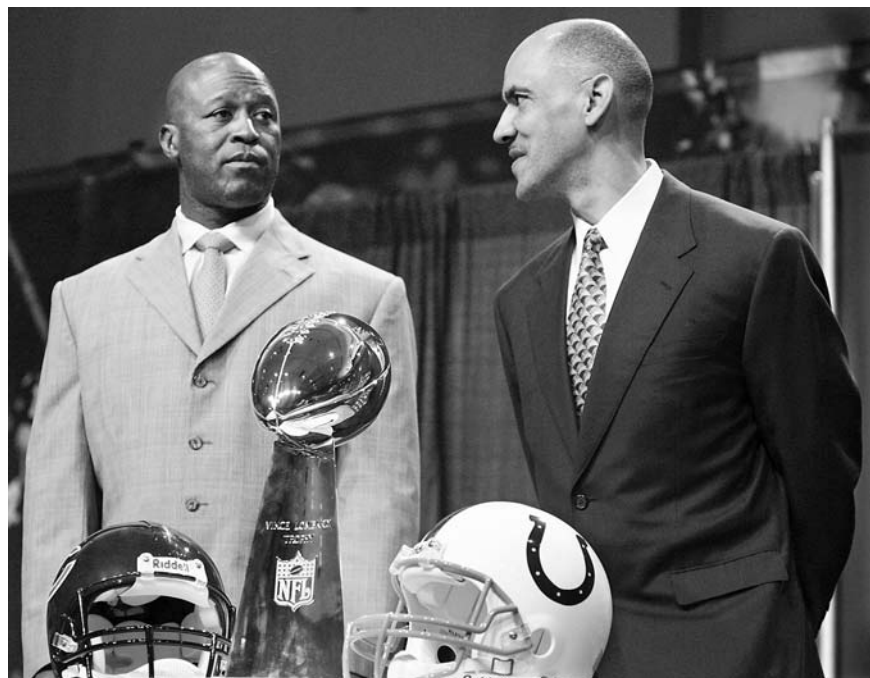
Campanis: No, it's not garbage, Mr. Koppel, because I played on a college team, and the center fielder was black, and in the backfield at NYU was a fullback who was black. Never knew the difference whether he was black or white. We were teammates. So it might just be, why are black men or black people not good swimmers? Because they don't have the buoyancy. Blacks may not have the desire to be in the front office. They are outstanding athletes, very God-gifted, and they're wonderful people . . . They are gifted with great musculature and various other things. They're fleet of foot. And this is why there are a lot of black major-league ballplayers. Now as far as having the background to become club presidents or presidents of a bank . . . I don't know.<sup>2</sup>

## EXCLUSION AND SPORT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RACIAL CLIMATE

The symbolism of triumph and tragedy with African Americans performing at the highest level in sport is a topic that traces back to Jack Johnson and completes its circle with Tiger Woods, with many African American athletes, businesspeople, and coaches in between. This is why the historical exclusion of African American coaches in the NFL is nothing out of the norm. One might ask: Why is this the case? How has all this changed over time? Why has it changed historically over time?

It must be stated that African Americans were deemed as only  $\frac{3}{4}$  human, according to the United States Constitution. Further, by the time Jack Johnson reigned as heavyweight champion of the world in 1908, new myths were created to justify hatred and jealousy of Johnson as "the man" and the athletic genius of the free world. Stereotypes and fables claiming that blacks had weak stomachs, inferior thought processes, and even yellow tails were all applied to Johnson. One of the reasons Johnson was able to navigate overtly racial and terrorizing times (with their ever-present threat of lynching) was that he was competing in an individual sport instead of a team sport. The pattern of dominating individual sports was evident in the achievements of blacks both before and during the Johnson era. Major Taylor (cycling), Issac Murphy (jockey), and Joe Louis also carried on the tradition by excelling at their non-team-oriented sports. The struggle to create equality in the popular American mindset at the time would be even more complex when taking into account the social institution of sport and higher education.

Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy (right) and Chicago coach Lovie Smith pose with the Vince Lombardi Super Bowl trophy during their press conference at the Miami Beach Convention Center, 2007.



AP Photo/Jeff Roberson

Even with these barriers facing African American college and professional athletes in the twentieth century they still prevailed by their courage, persistence, and excellent performance. Before examining two college coaches that created new discourses about African American leadership capabilities and one pioneer head coach in the early days of the NFL who displayed the same managerial excellence, we will turn our attention to the process of change for African American athletes as participants on the field and graduates of the various institutions—an important first step, as some of the players mentioned became assistant coaches, and even head coaches, at the collegiate level.

### ***Scholar-Athletes with Coaching and Leadership Experience***

The entire section is dedicated to selected profiles of African American men, demonstrating the historical context of participating in football at the collegiate—and, in a few cases, professional—level. Some of the key themes continue to be relevant for African American males seeking to

become head football coaches at any level today: racism, excellence, opportunity, access, and alumni and fan support.

The first black college coach was Abram Molineaux Hewlett, the first director of physical education at Harvard University, from 1859 through 1871. The first black college football game was played on Thanksgiving Day, 1892, between Johnson C. Smith and Livingstone College of Salisbury, both in North Carolina. Johnson C. Smith won by a score of 4 to 0.

Matthew W. Bullock enrolled in Dartmouth College in the fall of 1900, where he was a diligent student, remaining active in athletics and student affairs until his graduation in 1904. He belonged to several student boards, committees, and societies, including Paleopitas, Dartmouth's senior honor society. Bullock was also a member of the college Glee Club for four years and employed his musical abilities in earning money to pay for his college graduation. Bullock was an outstanding collegiate athlete. He was a member of Dartmouth's track team for four years and played varsity football for three seasons—football was the sport that Bullock excelled at as an outstanding end; it was the key to Dartmouth's success from 1901 to 1903.

Bullock was considered as brilliant on the field as in the classroom, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1904 and going on to complete his law degree at Harvard in 1907. In order to finance his law school education, Bullock turned to college and high school coaching. A custom at many colleges at the turn of the century was to hire a head football coach from outside one's own institution, and Massachusetts Agricultural College was no exception. A custom and paradigm at M.A.C. was hiring past Dartmouth players to coach its team, and in 1904 Matthew Bullock was hired for the job. The Athletic Board at M.A.C. made an appeal for alumni contributions that resulted in \$251.03 to be donated to pay the head coach's salary for the upcoming season. As a result, Bullock became one of the first salaried college coaches in America and the first African American man to hold the position of head coach at a predominantly white institution in American higher education. Bullock would go on to lead the team to several successful seasons and was highly praised in a report to the alumni (by the treasurer of the athletic board) as "one of the best football coaches in this part of the country. He is a gentleman of excellent character and knows his business. The college authorities and the student body and the members of the team are satisfied and pleased that he has been secured."<sup>3</sup>

Preceding Bullock was William H. Lewis, considered by many authorities as the finest football player of the decade, who played for Amherst College in Massachusetts from 1890 to 1894. He was an All-American center and is credited with creating the neutral zone at the line of scrimmage. He later played and coached at Harvard University. Lewis possessed superior character and leadership in addition to his athletic ability and was selected captain of the Amherst squad, and then again (at least for one game) at

Harvard. Lewis was elected to the Walter Camp elite and prestigious All-American teams in 1892 and 1893; authorities on the gridiron game later ranked him as the best player at his position (center) during the entire decade.

Lewis went on to earn his law degree from Harvard and combined his efforts as a young lawyer with part-time work as a football coach for his alma mater in Cambridge. According to sport historian David Wiggins, with a few exceptions, "the collegiate coaching system at the time placed alumni standouts, like Lewis, at or near the center of the autumn sporting ritual. The age of the full-time, professional coach would soon follow, but it would not include Black sportsmen until the end of the twentieth century."<sup>4</sup> Lewis was a student and scholar of the game and a keen strategist, publishing a book, *Primer of College Football* (1896), an essay on how to develop a football team, in Casper Whitney's journal *Outing* (1902), as well as a chapter on offensive and defensive line play in Walter Camp's *How to Play Football*. Lewis was a "race man" who was heavily involved in African American politics. His influence and abilities resulted in his appointment as United State attorney for Boston (1903–1906). Even more impressive, he held the post of assistant attorney general of the United States during the Taft administration (1911–1913) and as such was the highest-ranking African American in the federal government.

Paul Robeson, considered by many to be one of the great Americans, was born in New Jersey. Robeson was a twentieth-century renaissance man and excelled as an athlete, scholar, lawyer, and Broadway film star who became a major activist in the fight against racism in America. After winning an academic and athletic scholarship to Rutgers University, Paul competed in football, basketball, baseball, and track and field for a total of fourteen varsity letters. On the football field, he faced challenges commonplace for the few African American athletes competing against whites during this era. Robeson's teammates felt threatened by his presence at school and on the team. Because of these he was abused and attacked in his first week of practice. Robeson fought back later in the week and went on to become a two-time Walter Camp All-American. Paul Robeson endured both personal and broader cultural struggles while an athlete at Rutgers University. His triumphs serve as a testament to the courage, perseverance, and dignity that Robeson modeled each day of his life. Our nation's rich history has provided us with many men and women who have served as torchbearers for change and accomplishment. Yet there have been few who have done so in such a multi-talented way as Robeson did academically, athletically, and socially. Robeson was much like many early black pioneers involved in school and intercollegiate athletics, who used sport as a means to an end. Robeson best illustrated this concept while playing professional football for Akron, Indiana, and Milwaukee in the early days of the NFL.

His earnings went toward his education at Columbia Law School. He used the system rather than allowing the system to drain him. Robeson also went on to coach on a part-time basis at Rutgers and assisted Fritz Pollard in the early days of the NFL as a player and coach.

Fritz Pollard preceded Robeson by a couple of years as a college athlete at Brown University. Pollard led the Ivy League school to victories over Yale and Harvard in 1916 and on New Year's Day in 1917 became the first black to play in the Rose Bowl. Pollard went on to become the head coach of the Akron Pros and led them to the championship in 1921. Although Pollard was successful as the leader of a championship NFL team, he was prevented from continuing his craft. Nearly seventy years elapsed before another African American head coach even got the opportunity to coach in the NFL. Some of the themes of these barriers are discussed in the next section.

### **POLICY IMPACT ON SEGREGATION, DESEGREGATION, AND INTEGRATION: THE NFL ENTERPRISE AND ITS CONTEMPORARY HIRING PRACTICES REGARDING HEAD COACHES**

Legal scholar Jim Moya thoroughly addresses issues of access for African American head coaches in the important piece "Punt or Go for the Touchdown? A Title VII Analysis of the National Football League's Hiring Practices for Head Coaches," published in the *UCLA Law Review* in 1998. Moya argues that in order for a Title VII lawsuit to be filed and a case to be established the complainant must prove that

"a respondent uses a particular employment practice that causes a disparate impact on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." In the instant matter, the NFL clearly does not have a racially biased hiring policy. The hiring process usually consists of the management creating a "short list" of candidates to fill the coaching vacancy. Many times, the short list has the candidates ranked. Candidates are then brought in for interviews if they are interested in the position. After interviews, one of the candidates is chosen and offered the job. The creation of the short list inadvertently leaves African American assistants behind and is the most problematic aspect of the typical hiring process. The initial stage of the process is key because *qualified* individuals are at least given an opportunity to plead the case for their credentials and abilities. African Americans are excluded two different ways in the initial stage of the process.

First, these short lists are not inclusive of all the individuals who are qualified for head coaching positions. Professional head coaches are usually hired after serving as a head coach in college or a coordinator



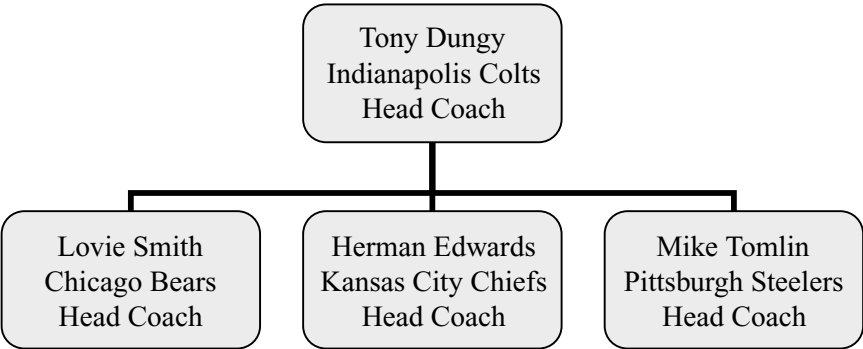
in the pros. Of the 15 coaching vacancies in 1997 and 1998, only Emmitt Thomas and Sherman Lewis were even offered interviews. Art Shell, the first African-American head coach in the modern NFL, Jimmy Raye, the offensive coordinator of the Kansas City Chiefs, and Ray Sherman, the new offensive coordinator of the Pittsburgh Steelers, are all notables who were excluded from any serious discussions for head coaching positions. Even those men were all qualified based on the criteria set forward by most owners and general managers; they were nonetheless left out in the cold when it came time for the 14 teams looking for head coaches to start the interview process.

Second, the short-list candidates usually are acknowledged because of connections the perspective employer has with others throughout the sports world. A three-month study conducted by *Newsday* concluded that for many perspective hires, one of the main factors in the hiring decisions was the successful candidates had developed connections with the decision-makers. The study also found these decision-makers have been slow to reach a level of comfort in hiring minority coaches. Bill Kuharich, General Manager of the New Orleans Saints and one of the pivotal individuals in hiring Mike Ditka as the head coach of the Saints, stated, "The way people get jobs is probably determined more by who you know than by talent and ability. You can slant statistics to meet your objective. But you've got to go back to the individual and trace the connection—who influenced the decision—and you can target why a guy got a job." This problem has manifested in such a way now that qualified candidates are excluded because of the strong reliance on social connections by owners and general managers. Whether those social connections are racially motivated, the result is that, disproportionately, African Americans are not given the opportunity to be considered for head coaching positions.

Moye's Title VII analysis comes prior to the postmodern area and a breakthrough of sorts in which minority hiring trees are "planted" so that they can grow. A hiring tree (see diagram below) is defined as a snapshot of the career paths and linkages of coaches (or individuals) in a given organization. In other words, it freezes and highlights the social network of leaders and those that they have mentored and embraced as part of their coaching family.

A critical step for (nonwhite) assistant coaches is becoming coordinators and networking with coaching leaders who can get them on the "right" hiring trees, enabling them to compete for head coaching vacancies. The diagram of Tony Dungy's tree is a snapshot of what all concerned with this topic should note. Analysis of the presence of hiring trees in the coaching

Figure 8.1: The Tony Dungy Hiring Tree



Adapted from: Professor Earl Smith, © 2007, *Race, Sport and the American Dream* (Smith 2007).

culture of collegiate and professional sports, coupled with the emergence of “new trees” in the landscape, is critical. One of the most famous hiring trees ever constructed in the history of sport is the tree of Bill Walsh. This tree was big and voluminous, complete with diversity in race but also diversity of thought. Some of the names on this famous tree include Dennis Green, George Siefert, Ray Rhodes, and Mike Holmgreen.

**THE CHANGING FACE OF SPORT: POST-CIVIL RIGHTS, POLICY, AND THE MODERN ERA**

***Cyrus Mehri and Johnny Cochran: The Numbers Game***

Following is a description of a report concerning black coaches in the NFL, as well as a discussion of the pros and cons of the Rooney Rule, written by the Fritz Pollard Alliance, an organization that works to create opportunities for black hire candidates (notes added):

On September 30, 2002, Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. and Cyrus Mehri issued a ground-breaking report—*Black Coaches in the National Football League: Superior Performance, Inferior Opportunities*—revealing that black NFL head coaches are held to a higher standard than their white counterparts, and are consequently denied a fair chance to compete for head coaching jobs.<sup>5</sup> The report opened the NFL’s eyes to its teams’ unfair hiring processes. One month later, on October 31, 2002, NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue announced the formation of a diversity committee, headed by Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney, to address the NFL’s minority-hiring practices. Within two months, the League announced a diversity plan, which included the

requirement that each team interview at least one minority candidate prior to selecting a head coach. The Rooney Rule has already positively impacted the League. On March 10, 2003, the Fritz Pollard Alliance was formed as an affinity group of NFL minority coaches, scouts and front office personnel. During the last couple of years the FPA has worked with the NFL to develop hiring guidelines for front office and scouting positions as well as talent development programs. The FPA advocates for policy changes in the NFL hiring practices and working in partnership with the NFL to create opportunities for minority candidates.

*The Impact of the Rooney Rule: Creating a New Custom of Access*

Dave Anderson of the New York Times commented that the Rooney Rule offers *access* for African-American candidates. "It didn't come easy, diversity never does. But at last, the National Football League has sharpened the teeth of its guidelines to provide at least a fairer shake to African-Americans who aspire to be one of its 32 head coaches."<sup>6</sup> In 2007, *The Washington Post* reported on how minority coaches have made the most of their opportunities which may open the door for others: "I think the best way to show that minority coaches can get the job done is by looking at the coaches out there right now who are getting the job done,' said former Giants linebacker Harry Carson, executive director of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, the organization formed two years ago to increase minority hiring in the NFL in the wake of the original Mehri/Cochran report. 'It's all the Alliance is trying to do—keep the playing field level and give minority coaches the opportunity so that they are not lost in the shuffle. When you have guys like Tony Dungy, Lovie Smith and Marvin Lewis doing exceptionally well, I think that's the best advertisement you could ask for.' Carson said the Pollard Alliance has never had a specific target number for minority head coaches, but indicated there are plenty of qualified candidates for any of the next wave of vacancies. 'We're not looking to take over the league,' he said. 'But there have been so many guys overlooked for so many years. That's why we're here—so guys who don't have a voice can make a little noise and get their names out there.'"<sup>7</sup> This season, Mark Maske of the Washington Post wrote, "The first Super Bowl matchup of teams led by black coaches is the culmination of a four-year push by people inside and outside the sport to open doors to minority coaches that have been closed for most of the NFL's history. Cyrus Mehri said he is pleased with the changes the league has made to improve diversity in its head coaching ranks. 'I think you have to look at it as a great success. You know it's a great success when it matters to the owners. From a process point of view, they're doing everything we asked them

to do. Now does that mean we've eradicated bias in the NFL? No. It's part of America. But we've made great strides. We couldn't have written a better script.' The leaders of the Fritz Pollard Alliance, the group spawned by the efforts of Mehri and Cochran, who died in 2005, and named for the first black in NFL history, have always said they didn't want to tell the owners which coaches to hire. They simply wanted to create interviewing opportunities, they said. But those opportunities led to jobs. 'Everything we're doing has exceeded our best expectations,' Mehri said. 'We really have had a cultural change. We don't win every time. We shouldn't win every time. But everyone is following the process.'<sup>8</sup> The sports term "statement game" has a new definition for Sunday's Super Bowl XLI, wrote Jarrett Bell of *USA Today*. The game's legacy will come not from its outcome but from its outset—when the Indianapolis Colts' Tony Dungy and the Chicago Bears' Lovie Smith take the sidelines as the first African-American head coaches to stand one victory from the NFL championships. John Wooten, chairman of a group that monitors and promotes the hiring of minority coaches in the NFL, says the buzz surrounding Dungy and Smith is reminiscent of what he experienced as a youth in the 1930s and 1940s. "Since the (conference) championship games, for a lot of black people in this country—waiters, hotel domestic workers, businessmen, bus drivers, people in barbershops—it has gone back to the Joe Louis days,' says Wooten. 'When I was a little boy, wherever he fought, I was with Joe Louis. People who care less about football will be watching the game.'<sup>9</sup>

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who under predecessors Tagliabue and Pete Rozelle was a key administrator in implementing a program that increased exposure for minority candidates, believes mainstream America should applaud this Super Bowl as much as African-Americans do. "I know I do,' Goodell said. 'After the (conference) championship games, I could barely sleep. I was so excited about it. . . . But the progress has to continue. It can't stop.'<sup>10</sup>

In the final analysis of the positive changes because of policy, tremendous progress has occurred over the past four years since the adoption of the Rooney Rule. The number of African-American head coaches jumped from two to seven. With the help of the written guidelines, recent hiring cycles proceeded smoothly, with a record number of meaningful interviews for minority candidates. During 2003, the Commissioner added an enforcement provision to the Rule. There are also now a record number of minority offensive and defensive coordinators, which creates more of a pipeline of future head coaches.<sup>11</sup>

***The 2006 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Football League (Lapchick with Ekiyor and Ruiz)***

The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) located at the University of Central Florida publishes the *Racial and Gender Report Card (RGRC)* to indicate areas of improvement, stagnation, and regression in the racial and gender composition of professional and college sports personnel and to contribute to the improvement of integration in front office and college athletics department positions.<sup>12</sup> The NFL recorded steady progress on racial hiring practices in the 2006 NFL Racial and Gender Report Card. The NFL improved its record for both race and gender, raising its grade for race to a solid B+, approaching an A-, with a score of 88.6 points out of 100. The Institute did not issue a grade for gender in this report card, hampered by limited ability to access supporting data.

Using data from the 2006 season, the Institute conducted an analysis of racial breakdowns of the players, managers and coaches. In addition, the report includes a racial and gender breakdown of the top team management, senior administration, professional administration, physicians and head trainers, and broadcasters. Coaches, general managers, presidents, and owners were updated as of August 25, 2007.

The biggest breakthrough occurred when two African American head coaches faced each other in the Super Bowl for the first time. The report shows the significant progress made in the NFL, especially in the key positions of head coach (seven in 2006, six in 2007), general manager (four in 2006, five in 2007), and assistant coach, where the NFL reached all-time highs. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has now completed his first year, and the results bode well for the future of more opportunities for people of color in the NFL. The following are the highlights of the report:

- The Rooney Rule helped the NFL increase the number of African American head coaches from two in 2002 to seven in 2006.
- An African American head coach won the Super Bowl for the first time in 2007. The game was the first in which two African American head coaches faced off for the championship.
- There are six African American head coaches in 2007. Mike Tomlin was hired by the Pittsburgh Steelers for the 2007 season, but Art Shell and Dennis Green were released by the Oakland Raiders and Arizona Cardinals, respectively.
- In the 2006 report, the NFL had four African American general managers. As the 2007 season started, there were five when Jerry Reese was named the general manager of the New York Giants.

- A record percentage of people of color served in assistant coaching positions in the 2006 season with 165 assistant coaches of color, or 38 percent—up from 34 percent in the last report card.
- In the 2006 NFL season, the percentage of white players remained fairly constant at 31 percent, but the percentage of African American players increased from 65.5 to 67 percent.
- Amy Trask of the Oakland Raiders remained the only female president/CEO of a team in the NFL for the 2006 season. A person of color has never served as president in the history of the NFL.
- There were thirteen African American vice presidents in 2006, three less than reported in the report card the year before.
- People of color increased slightly in both team senior administration positions and in professional administration.
- In general, the record of NFL teams vis-à-vis gender hiring practices remained poor, although the percentage of women increased slightly in the categories of team vice presidents, team senior administration positions, and professional administration. Overall, results were close to the results in the previous racial and gender report card.
- African Americans increased from twelve to thirteen percent of radio and TV broadcasters; Latino broadcasters decreased from fourteen percent to thirteen percent.

### *Head Coaches*

The efforts of the Commissioner's Office, as well as of the diversity groups appointed by the NFL in the last four years, have brought about a dramatic change in the constitution of the head coaching demographic. Former players formed the Fritz Pollard Alliance to add pressure and create more momentum for change. Nothing highlighted this more than when the Indianapolis Colts and Chicago Bears faced off in the 2007 Super Bowl with Tony Dundy and Lovie Smith, two African Americans, leading their respective teams. It was the first time this happened in the NFL. An analogous event had only happened once in the NBA and has never happened in major-league baseball.

The Rooney Rule, which requires that people of color be interviewed as part of the search process for head coaches, has helped to more than double the number of African American head coaches in the NFL from two to seven in 2006. The Rooney Rule was named after Steeler's owner Dan Rooney, head of the league's diversity committee. The NFL's policy is similar to the approach adopted earlier by Major League Baseball in 1999 under Bud Selig, which helped triple the number of managers of color in MLB in the first few years after implementation.

In 2003, with the Cincinnati Bengals' hiring of Marvin Lewis, the number of head coaches of color in the NFL increased to three. The percentage of African American head coaches grew to sixteen percent before the start of the 2004 season when the NFL added two more African American head coaches: Dennis Green of the Arizona Cardinals and Lovie Smith of the Chicago Bears. After the 2005 Super Bowl, Romeo Crennel was hired as head coach of the Cleveland Browns, giving the NFL six African American head coaches, two times the previous high of three.

After the 2005 NFL season, Herman Edwards was released from his contract with the New York Jets and was subsequently hired by the Kansas City Chiefs. Art Shell was hired as the head coach of the Oakland Raiders. Shell was the first African American coach in the NFL when he was hired by the Raiders in 1989 a position in which he continued until 1994. The seven NFL coaches in the 2006 season were

- Romeo Crennel, Cleveland Browns
- Tony Dungy, Indianapolis Colts
- Herman Edwards, Kansas City Chiefs
- Marvin Lewis, Cincinnati Bengals
- Lovie Smith, Chicago Bears
- Art Shell, Oakland Raiders
- Dennis Green, Arizona Cardinals

Dennis Green and Art Shell were let go after the 2006 season, and Mike Tomlin was hired by the Pittsburgh Steelers, leaving six African American head coaches at the start of the 2007 NFL season:

- Romeo Crennel, Cleveland Browns
- Tony Dungy, Indianapolis Colts
- Herman Edwards, Kansas City Chiefs
- Marvin Lewis, Cincinnati Bengals
- Lovie Smith, Chicago Bears
- Mike Tomlin, Pittsburgh Steelers

NFL grade for head coaches in 2006 *Racial and Gender Report Card*: A-

### *Assistant Coaches*

The 2006 season saw a record percentage of people of color in assistant coaching positions in the NFL with 165 assistant coaches of color, or thirty-eight percent. This was up from thirty-four percent in the last report card (2005). In the 2006 NFL season, the number of white assistant coaches dropped from sixty-six to sixty-two percent, but African Americans

**Table 8.1:** Historical Listing of African-American Professional Head Coaches in the NFL

| *9 permanent head coaches, 1 interim |              |              |               |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| head coaches                         | NFL          |              |               |
|                                      | Team         | Year(s)      | Record        |
| Art Shell                            | L.A. Raiders | 1989–1994    | 54–38         |
|                                      | Oak Raiders  | 2006         | 2–14          |
| Dennis Green                         | Minnesota    | 1992–2001    | 97–62         |
|                                      | Arizona      | 2004–2006    | 16–32         |
| Ray Rhodes                           | Philadelphia | 1995–1998    | 29–34–1       |
|                                      | Green Bay    | 1999         | 8–8           |
| Tony Dungy                           | Tampa Bay    | 1996–2001    | 54–42         |
|                                      | Indianapolis | 2002–present | 60–25         |
| Terry Robiskie                       | Washington   | 2000         | 1–2 (interim) |
|                                      | Cleveland    | 2004         | 1–2 (interim) |
| Herman Edwards                       | N.Y. Jets    | 2001–2005    | 39–41         |
| Marvin Lewis                         | K.C. Chiefs  | 2006–present | 9–7           |
|                                      | Cincinnati   | 2003–present | 35–29         |
| Lovie Smith                          | Chicago      | 2004–present | 29–19         |
| Romeo Crennel                        | Cleveland    | 2005–present | 10–22         |
| Mike Tomlin                          | Pittsburgh   | 2007         | First season  |

Source: Lapchick and the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport © 2007 (2006 data)

increased by three percentage points to thirty-five percent. Latinos moved up one percentage point to two percent, and Asian assistant coaches remained at one percentage point. Six African Americans held coordinator positions in the NFL.

NFL grade for assistant coaches: A+

*Top Management*

*CEOs/Presidents* Amy Trask of the Oakland Raiders was the only woman president/CEO in the NFL in 2005 and 2006. There has never been a president/CEO of color in the NFL.

*General Manager/Principal-in-Charge* In what the NFL defined as the position equivalent to a general manager, whites held eighty-seven percent of the posts in the 2006 season, the remaining thirteen percent being African American. This was the same as the report card of the year before. The four African Americans in this position during the 2006 season were

- Ozzie Newsome, general manager and executive vice president, Baltimore Ravens



- Rod Graves, vice president, football operations, Arizona Cardinals
- Rick Smith, general manager, Houston Texans
- James Harris, vice president of player personnel, Jacksonville Jaguars

NFL grade for general manager/principal-in-charge: B

## **CONCLUSION**

For the 13 years, I have taught race and sport to over a thousand students at Washington State University, the University of Michigan, Arizona State University, and the University of Central Florida, where I currently teach. The scarcity of African American leaders, managers, executives, and coaches in college and professional sports is the topic I am most frequently questioned about during lectures. Why is this persistently the issue in which students are most interested? I believe the reason this question is on the tip of their tongues at these predominantly white institutions is simple. Many of my white students have been socialized to perceive that America is a fair place, especially when it comes to competitive college athletics and professional sports.

America is too complex to believe that the “playing field is level,” oblivious to the structural and informal inequities that still exist in this nation of which I am proud to be a part. The irony is that at America’s institutions of higher learning, the issue of equity and diversity is a far greater problem than it is in the NFL. Nonetheless, the reports and studies mentioned earlier in this paper must continue to objectively monitor the situation and trends having to do with head coaches in professional sports.

There is both hope and despair surrounding the issue of equity hiring in sports. If race relations and sport has reached the pinnacle of success, then why would we as a nation have to still grapple with and even conduct studies such as those by Mehri and Cochran and Lapchick at the Institute of Diversity and Ethics in Sport? Longtime scholar and activist Professor Angela Davis appears to have summed it up perfectly: “Racism operates differently at various periods of history. The terrain and the form of racism also changes.” This is precisely why African Americans are overrepresented as players but underrepresented as head coaches. African American players have historically been denied access to participate on the field in college and professional sports. Sam “Bam” Cunningham dominated a 1971 contest between Alabama and the University of Southern California (USC). During the contest, Cunningham (African American) shone against an all-white Alabama team. The fans in attendance shouted, “Get us one! Get us one!” The next year, Alabama allowed Wilbur Jackson (African American) to compete at the same position Cunningham had dominated: running back. African Americans instantly became a commodity that

schools needed to be able to compete at the highest level. This was the historical moment that had “changed the game.” The magic moment has yet to come at the collegiate level—the NFL has consistently doubled, tripled, and exceeded the total number (as well as percentage) of coaches in Division IA football. On a positive note, the same is not true when it comes to the NFL.

Shortly before the Super Bowl led by Lovie Smith (Chicago Bears) and Tony Dungy (Indianapolis Colts), I had the pleasure of being interviewed by Rod Woodson and Darrin Herdon on the twenty-four-hour show *NFL Network*. I was asked a range of questions: specifically, What is the social impact of two African American head coaches going head to head in the NFL’s Super Bowl spectacle and marquee event? In short, the moment proves that contrary to the Al Campanis analysis of leadership by African American males, this ethnic group does have what is necessary to compete, win, and succeed at the highest level when given the opportunity to demonstrate its abilities. In terms of popular culture, Tony Dungy’s best seller *Quiet Strength* (2007) is most important, chronicling the reality that African American coaches, social change, and popular culture are constant in an ever-changing, constantly evolving America.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

Permission was granted to extensively cite Jim Moyer’s and Richard Lapchick’s research for this article.

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# The Olympics

Dave Zirin

*Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.*

—The Olympic Charter

There has always existed a yawning gap between the ideals of the Olympics, with its emphasis on “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” and the actuality of how it was founded and how it was run. Because of this gap, the Games have been a site of dramatic political theater and, in 1968, explosive protest.<sup>1</sup>

## ORIGINS

The modern Olympic Games began in 1896 as a place for imperial rivals—in the process of carving up the world from Cuba to Congo to the Philippines—to spur fevered nationalist frenzies through sports. Over the years, little has changed. During the Cold War, the Games helped to fix ideas of the enemy in the minds of East and West. Today, they’ve taken a place at the corporate trough, helping multinationals soak cities and giving rise to Olympic-sized graft.<sup>2</sup>

For more than a century, the Olympics has been run by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a club for fossilized aristocrats with nostalgia for anything with epaulets. When French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin launched the IOC at the end of the nineteenth century, its membership comprised five European nobles, two generals, and nine leading industrialists. Between 1894 and the turn of the century, de Coubertin added ten more barons, princes, and counts. But the days of de Coubertin seem innocent and carefree compared to what the IOC would become.<sup>3</sup>

The dominant Olympic figure of the twentieth century was not Jesse Owens, Carl Lewis, or Mark Spitz, but Avery Brundage. As IOC president, Brundage never failed to use his politics to sculpt who and what the Olympics would glorify.<sup>4</sup>

In 1936, when the Olympics were to be staged in Hitler's Germany, Brundage—then merely the president of the United States Olympic Committee—personally set out to quash a rising din of protest. He met with Hitler in Berlin, where they shared smiles and handshakes for the cameras. Brundage returned to the states with tales of a new Germany that treated Jews and other national minorities with exceptional care. He dismissed the anti-Hitler rumblings as the work of a Communist conspiracy.

Brundage's steadfast support of Hitler earned him the respect of the other members of the International Olympic Committee. They voted to have him brought into the club, replacing American Ernest Lee Jahnke, who had called for a Berlin boycott. Unlike other prominent Nazi sympathizers such as Henry Ford and Joseph Kennedy, Brundage never apologized for his Hitler leanings. As late as 1941, he was praising the Reich at a Madison Square Garden America First rally. He was even expelled from the right-wing anti-World War II America First Committee because of his endless love of all things Hitler.<sup>5</sup>

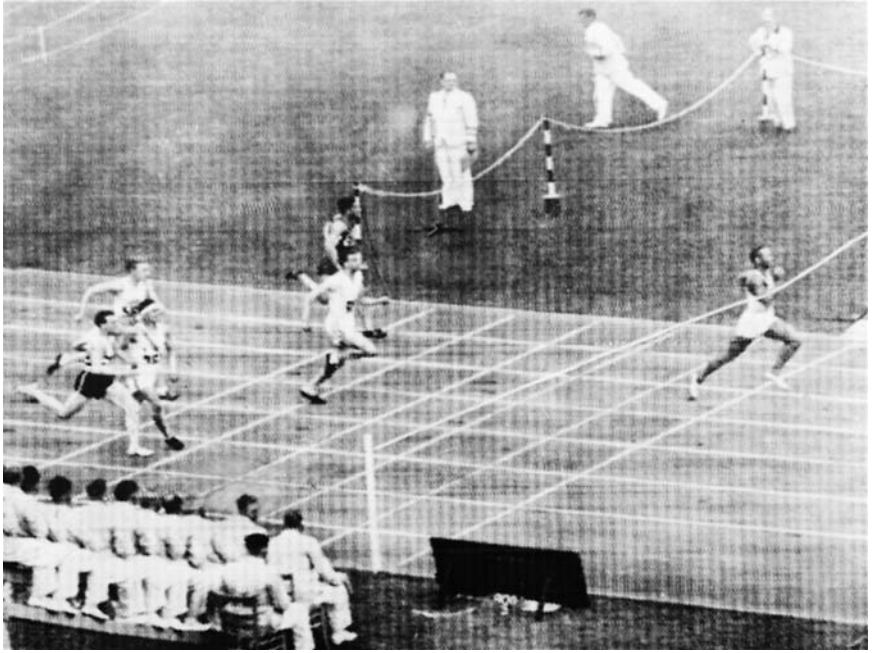
But despite the cloud of controversy that surrounded him, Brundage remained chief of the IOC until 1972. Over the years, he used his position to speak out against women competing at the Olympics, continuously denigrating their contributions. He strongly opposed the exclusion of Rhodesia, South Africa, or any state that practiced forms of white supremacy. He was also prone to the most hackneyed, sanctimonious spew, such as "The Olympic Movement is a twentieth-century religion where there is no injustice of caste, of race, of family, of wealth." Underneath the ponderous sanctimony, he was an authoritarian leader, contemptuous of civil rights and the concerns of Olympic athletes, who took to dubbing him "Slavery Avery."<sup>6</sup>

## 1936 OLYMPICS

The great gap between Olympic Charter and political reality was revealed at the 1936 Olympics. This is where Jesse Owens transcended mere athletic greatness by winning four gold medals in Adolph Hitler's Berlin.

But Owens's famed Olympic feats almost never came to pass. A movement quickly sprouted in the states to keep the U.S. team out of Germany, concerned that Hitler would use the Olympics as a pulpit for Nazism. Already Germany had produced posters, distributing them throughout Europe, showing Hitler with a faraway look in his eyes with the slogan, "I summon the youth of the world to the Olympics!"<sup>7</sup>

Jesse Owens is shown breaking the tape in the second heat of the quarterfinals of the 100-meter race on the opening day of competition in the 1936 Summer Olympics.



AP Photo

The extent of Hitler's crimes at that point had not surfaced, but his politics of Aryan supremacy were well known and enough whispers had made their way across the pond about what Hitlerism would mean for the non-Aryans of Germany. This coalesced into the first Olympic boycott movement.

As the boycott debate raged, some pointed out the hypocrisy of the United States' taking this kind of moral stand against Germany. George S. Schuyler, who opposed the boycott, wrote to the *New York Times*,

[W]here could the Olympic Games be held where liberty is not stamped into the mud and millions are not ruthlessly persecuted and exploited? Right now it probably would be impossible for the much-lauded Ralph Metcalfe, Jesse Owens, Eulace Peacock, Cornelius Johnson, Al Threadgill, Archie Williams, Ed Gordon, Jimmy LuValle, or any of the other sepia-tinted stars to get a decent meal or a room in any public hotel or café below the Mason-Dixon line (and but few above it), to say nothing of actually competing in a track meet with the Southerners. Why does the Fair Play Committee remain silent about this condition? Must we move our jim-crow areas to Germany before these gentlemen will break their silence?<sup>8</sup>

Walter White, the President of the NAACP, however, believed the boycott was just, Jim Crow or not:

The United States has much to answer for in the matter of racial discrimination, especially against Negro athletes in the South. Instead, we ask the AAU to vote against participation on the ground that Germany has violated her pledges against racial discrimination, and for American athletes to participate would be to negate every principle upon which the Olympic games are based. Refusal to participate will, we believe, do untold good in helping Germany and the world to realize that racial bigotry must be opposed in its every manifestation. To participate would be to place approval upon the German Government's deplorable persecution of racial and religious groups and would stultify the Amateur Athletic Union and all athletes who participate.<sup>9</sup>

White then wrote an open letter to the 22-year-old Owens, asking him not to run:

I fully realize how great a sacrifice it will be for you to give up the trip to Europe and to forgo the acclaim, which your athletic prowess will unquestionably bring you. I realize equally well how hypocritical it is for certain Americans to point the finger of scorn at any other country for racial or any other kind of bigotry.

[The] Olympics, if held in Germany under the present regime, transcends all other issues. Participation by American athletes, and especially those of our own race, which has suffered more than any other from American race hatred, would, I firmly believe, do irreplaceable harm. . . . I have written at greater length than I had intended from the outset. I hope, however, that you will not take offense at my writing you thus frankly with the hope that you will take the high stand that we should rise above personal benefit and help strike a blow at intolerance. I am sure that your stand will be applauded by many people in all parts of the world, as your participation under the present situation in Germany would alienate many high-minded people who are awakening to the dangers of intolerance wherever it raises its head.<sup>10</sup>

The *Amsterdam News* urged black athletes not to take part in the games.

"Humanity demands that Hitlerism be crushed," an editorialist wrote, "and yours is the opportunity to strike a blow which may hasten the inevitable end."<sup>11</sup>



Owens publicly said early on in the process, "If there is racial discrimination against minorities in Germany, then we must withdraw from the Olympics." But neither he nor his coaches ever took boycotting the games seriously. This is not a hypocrisy that can be laid at the feet of Owens alone. The financial—and psychological—investment that goes into the training for these games makes a boycott a difficult if not impossible request.<sup>12</sup>

But the twenty-two-year-old Owens was not the person who delivered the Olympics to Hitler. That was Avery Brundage. As head of the United States Olympic Committee, Brundage curtly rejected what he called "the politicization of sport" and believed the United States should compete proudly at the Berlin games. But the uproar would not subside, so he went to Germany himself to settle the question about whether Germany and Hitler were as bad as the boycotters said. He shared smiles and handshakes with Hitler for the cameras and returned to the States with tales of a new Germany that treated Jews and other national minorities with exceptional care.

Brundage's steadfast support of Hitler earned him the respect of the other members of the International Olympic Committee. They voted to have him brought into their exclusive club, replacing the American representative Ernest Lee Jahnke, who supported the Berlin boycott.<sup>13</sup>

Most famously, Brundage absolved himself of all moral responsibility when he said that organized amateur sport "[c]annot, with good grace or propriety, interfere in the internal, political, religious, or racial affairs of any country or group." Of course, by bestowing grace onto the Third Reich, he was doing just that. Although he claimed to believe that "the Olympic movement" should be apart from politics, it was really only a certain kind of politics.<sup>14</sup>

Brundage followed up his support of a Berlin Olympics with justifications backed by bigotry. "The fact that no Jews have been named so far to compete for Germany doesn't necessarily mean that they have been discriminated against on that score," Brundage said on July 26, 1935. "In forty years of Olympic history, I doubt if the number of Jewish athletes competing from all nations totaled one percent of those in the games. In fact, I believe one half of one percent would be a high percentage."<sup>15</sup>

Fred Rubien, the secretary of the United States Olympic Committee backed Brundage up, saying, "Germans are not discriminating against Jews in their Olympic trials. The Jews are eliminated because they are not good athletes. Why, there are not a dozen Jews in the world of Olympic caliber—and not one in our winter sports that I know of."<sup>16</sup>

Actually, twenty-three Jewish athletes had won Olympic medals at the winter and summer games in 1932. The winner of the 100 meters in 1924 was the British Jew Harold Abrahams, immortalized in the movie *Chariots of Fire*.<sup>17</sup>

As Red Smith said of Brundage, "Although Avery was frequently wrong-headed, he could also be arrogant and condescending."<sup>18</sup>

The games themselves at first seemed to justify every fear of the boycotters. To Hitler, the Berlin games were, as Jeremy Schaap writes in his book *Triumph*, "A fascist fantasy come true." Ceremonies were set up with the subtlety of a tank procession in Red Square, all aimed to shower further glory on the Third Reich.<sup>19</sup>

Grantland Rice, covering the games, gave a chilling description of what he saw:

Just twenty-two years ago this day the world went to war. On the twenty-second anniversary of the outbreak of that great conflict I passed through more than 700,000 uniforms on my way to the Olympic Stadium—brown shirts, black guards, gray-green waves of regular army men and marines—seven massed military miles rivaling the mobilization of August 1, 1914. The opening ceremonies of the eleventh Olympiad, with mile upon mile, wave upon wave of a uniformed pageant, looked more like two world wars than the Olympic Games.<sup>20</sup>

Brundage's canard that politics and sport resided in separate worlds was betrayed by the Nazis' own publications. "Athletes and sport are the preparatory school of the political will in the service of the state," Kurt Munch wrote in a Nazi-sanctioned book titled *Knowledge about Germany*. "Non-political, so-called neutral sportsmen are unthinkable in Hitler's state."<sup>21</sup>

The Nazi pomp and circumstance, so derided today, actually launched the kind of over-the-top nationalism associated with the Olympics today. The Nazi Olympics were also the birth of the kinds of stark repression associated with the Olympics, as governments have attempted to cleanse cities for an international audience. On July 16, Berlin police had rounded up 800 Gypsies and put them in an internment camp. After the undesirables had been removed, Berlin was scrubbed down. Richard Walter Darre, the German minister of food and agriculture, issued a decree that was sent to local authorities throughout Germany to enforce: "All anti-Semitic posters must be suppressed during the period of question. The fundamental attitude of the Government does not change, but Jews will be treated as correctly as Aryans at this time. . . . Houses on the main roads must be whitened, and even repainted if possible. Street lighting must be improved. Streets and squares must be cleaned. Agricultural workers in the fields must not take their meals near the roads, nor pass near the roads."<sup>22</sup>

But one thing Hitler and company did not count on was the dominance of not only Owens, but all black Americans at the games. Black athletes starred at the Olympics, including long jump silver medalist Mack Robinson.

Upon returning home, Mack was unable to find a job other than sweeping the Pasadena streets. Showing the defiant streak that would illuminate in his younger brother, Jackie, Mack would make a point to sweep in his leather USA Olympic jacket, which caused local whites to call the police and charge him with being “provocative.”<sup>23</sup>

But Owens was the star. He dominated his events, winning four gold medals in the 100, the 200, the long jump, and the relay. No one had ever done that before, and only Carl Lewis, in 1984, did it afterward. “No European crowd had ever seen such a combination of blazing speed and effortless smoothness, like something blown in a gale,” wrote Grantland Rice. “You could hear the chorus of gasps as he left all rivals far behind.”<sup>24</sup>

This infuriated Hitler. He refused to be photographed with Owens or even acknowledge the existence of the man who stole the games. “The Americans ought to be ashamed of themselves for letting their medals be won by Negroes,” he said. “I myself would never shake hands with one of them.”<sup>25</sup>

Hitler wasn’t the only world leader to give Owens the back of his hand. In 1940, Owens campaigned for Republican presidential nominee Alf Landon, saying in speeches, “Hitler didn’t snub me—it was our president [Franklin Roosevelt] who snubbed me. The president didn’t even send me a telegram.”<sup>26</sup>

The American sports writers found a new appreciation for black athletes, now that the black was rimmed with gold. Westbrook Pegler wrote, “The American team will win, thanks to the Negro athletes, whose presence on the squad is proof of the democracy of sports in this country and the result necessarily will discredit dictatorial sportsmanship according to the values established by Adolf Hitler and Mussolini.”<sup>27</sup>

“I can’t help wondering,” Bill Corum wrote from the press box shortly after Owens broke the tape, “if Herr Hitler was thinking about the racial superiority of pure Aryan strains as he saw the Midnight Express whip past. And Jesse, he doesn’t even stop to whistle for the crossing.”<sup>28</sup>

If Jesse Owens’s triumph exists in the political land of the symbolic, a much more direct confrontation was put toward the hypocrisy of the Olympic Charter by anti-apartheid activist Dennis Brutus.

## BRUTUS

No one has ever used sports to advance the cause of social justice quite like Dennis Brutus. The eighty-three-year-old Brutus is perhaps best known today as the former Poet Laureate of South Africa, a man called the “singing voice of the South African Liberation Movement.” He spent decades fighting the apartheid system of white supremacy, earning a bullet in his stomach and captivity at the notorious Robben Island Prison off

Capetown, South Africa, for his troubles. It was at Robben Island that Brutus spent time breaking stones with a former boxer named Nelson Mandela.<sup>29</sup>

But the least examined part of Brutus's legacy is how he used sports in general—and the Olympics in particular—to highlight the savage inequalities of South Africa's apartheid system: the gap between the purported level playing field of sports and the incredibly unlevel terrain of everyday life. This is why one observer described him as "more than any other single person . . . responsible for South Africa's and Rhodesia's exclusion from the Olympic Games."<sup>30</sup>

Sports not only surrounded Brutus's childhood, as it does for many in sports-mad South African, but also enlarged his political understanding of the world. "I was very enthusiastic, but not very skillful," he said. "But I grew up in a ghetto, a segregated area. I went to a segregated school and the sport is all around you." For a young Dennis Brutus, access determined what he could and could not play. "Going to school we had very little track and field for blacks, it was mostly for white kids and we would read about them going to the Olympics or whatever. But we were not ourselves able to participate. There were no tracks, no stadiums."<sup>31</sup>

It was Brutus's organizational skills, not his athletic skills that landed him in the middle of the South African world of sports. He became a sports club secretary, putting together matches, rosters, and schedules. This put him in position to coordinate many athletes and teams excluded from Olympic consideration. The injustice, the disappointment, the anger, among those he worked with fueled his desire to fight apartheid. As he said to me, "If you want to know the origins of me as an activist and as an organizer, it really comes from my initial [involvement] in sport."<sup>32</sup>

In 1960, Brutus founded SANROC, the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee, which grew to challenge the most powerful of international bodies—the International Olympic Committee—and its leader, the imposing and infamous Avery Brundage. In a recent interview, Brutus recalled,

In the 1950s the [South African] Prime Minister makes the statement in Parliament that "We will never allow Blacks on any of our teams." I sent the statement to Avery Brundage in Chicago and wrote, "Hey, here's a country that says it will never allow Blacks on its teams. But you, as president of the IOC, guardian of Olympic values, should be able to say, "This is in violation of the Olympic charter."<sup>33</sup>

In response to the pressure of SANROC, Brundage sent a fact-finding team to South Africa to investigate whether there really was, in fact, racial discrimination in the country—just as he had sent a team to Berlin in 1936:

the one that concluded that there was no anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. Brutus, for his part, was arrested to prevent him from attending the meeting. Because of this, and other political activities, Brutus was on Robben Island in 1964 when the first suspension of South Africa's involvement in international play was announced. As he remembered, "We were in a group with some political prisoners, and one of the new prisoners had read the papers. So the suspension may have taken place a week or two earlier. We don't know the exact date. But the new man announced to us all, 'Hey, have you heard? South Africa is suspended, you know.' So we all cheer and of course we get punished and got our food taken away. But it was an occasion for celebration and we cheered as the guards stood over us armed, with automatic rifles."<sup>34</sup>

The South African issue—and SANROC's challenge to their participation—was a catalyst for transforming the entire structure of international sport. SANROC used the IOC's own charter to highlight the hypocrisy of Brundage's precious Olympic movement.

But SANROC also received a boost at this time from the politics of the Cold War: Soviet delegates to the IOC wanted the issue of admitting an apartheid team raised for debate. Brutus and his allies had no illusions in the Soviet support:

Let's not kid ourselves. The Russian approach is essentially "We are on the side of the liberation struggles because we want to be identified with the emerging nations in the big power struggle between East and West." So it's not as if they're really coming out of a really altruistic motive. Of course the Soviet Union is more than the Soviet Union. It is Romania, it is Bulgaria, it is East Germany, it is Hungary, so that they form a very powerful bloc within the Olympic structure. But it was really the grassroots struggles of the 1960s that propelled the struggle forward. By the '60s the question of South Africa and the question of racism in South Africa had become an issue of international debate, which forced the IOC to redefine the first chapter of the Olympic charter to make a more precise stand against racism. Changing the charter increased the pariah status of South Africa and in addition gave the IOC the power to take action.<sup>35</sup>

But the IOC's "power to take action" was not accompanied by actual deeds. Pressure continued to build from 1964–1967 and culminated in that most political of Olympic Games: Mexico City, 1968.

In Mexico there are all the pressures coming from three areas: black Americans under the leadership of Dr. Harry Edwards, who had formed the Olympic Project for Human Rights; they're getting pressure from

the socialist bloc; and they're getting pressure from the South African bloc and our allies, which fortunately were not exclusively socialist. We were able to get allies in the Caribbean and in Asia and in South America. This was important because a common slur of pro-apartheid forces was that SANROC was funded by the USSR.<sup>36</sup>

Although many world-class athletes in the U.S. were silent on the issue of apartheid sports, Brutus was able to bring a select few into the fold, including New York Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton. In addition, basketball star Lew Alcindor and the athletes in the Olympic Project for Human Rights all said that they stood with their South African brothers and sisters.

The public attention proved to be a mighty embarrassment to the IOC. Brutus notes that even Mexico's politicians—who had invested millions in the games and couldn't afford for the Olympic spectacle to become an Olympic debacle—began to crank up the pressure on Brundage. As sixty countries threatened to boycott the games over the question of racial discrimination, the actions of the black athletes from the United States were critical to shedding light on the conflict—although there were tensions between the South African and African American organizers about how best to proceed. "The importance of the American black athletes' revolt cannot be minimized," says Brutus.

I have to say: Harry Edwards and I disagreed then, and we might even disagree now. But my whole approach was that while I supported them they were using the wrong line of argument. They were using the games to attack a laundry list of grievances, from treatment in the ghetto, unemployment, racism in the laws, and so on. And Brundage had a straightforward answer. He said the Olympics have nothing to do with these issues. So however justified you are, I don't have to take any action on it. But when I said the charter says that every country must be free to participate with regards to race, religion, or politics, I was within the Olympic charter. So I think their line was not a good one in terms of the IOC. But their stance certainly helped us in South Africa. It meant a tremendous deal to know that there was pressure coming from the U.S. and I think it helped the U.S. to know there was pressure coming from South Africa.<sup>37</sup>

## THE UTTERLY EXPLOSIVE 1968 OLYMPICS

It has been forty years since Tommy Smith (son of a migrant worker) and Harlem's John Carlos took the medal stand at the 1968 Olympics and created what is arguably the most enduring image in sports history: their

black-gloved fists extended to the sky. Smith and Carlos's stunning gesture of revolt and resistance was not the result of some spontaneous urge to get face time on the evening news, but the result of several years of organizing.<sup>38</sup>

In the fall of 1967, amateur black athletes formed OPHR, the Olympic Project for Human Rights, to organize an African American boycott of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. OPHR, its lead organizer Dr. Harry Edwards, and its primary athletic spokespersons, 200-meter star Smith and 400-meter sprinter Lee Evans, were very influenced by the black freedom struggle. Their goal was nothing less than to expose how the United States used black athletes to project a lie both at home and internationally. But it started on much humbler terms. As Lee Evans said to me, "I was aware, but I didn't really speak out until the fall of 1967, when no one would rent us housing close to the university. At that time the only black males on the campus were athletes: basketball, football, or track. Harry Edwards was working on his doctorate and he was around. He got wind about our complaints and called a meeting. This is how it started. We started the Olympic Project for Human Rights. And all this came out of us not finding housing close enough to the university."<sup>39</sup>

For Smith, it started through what he was learning in his classes at San Jose State. "It really started last semester," he said in 1968. "I took a class in black leadership. I started me thinking: What the hell is going on in the U.S.? I'm a human. What kind of rights do I have? What kind of rights don't I have? Why can't I get these rights?"<sup>40</sup>

In the founding statement of OPHR, they wrote,

We must no longer allow this country to use a few so called Negroes to point out to the world how much progress she has made in solving her racial problems when the oppression of Afro-Americans is greater than it ever was. We must no longer allow the sports world to pat itself on the back as a citadel of racial justice when the racial injustices of the sports world are infamously legendary . . . any black person who allows himself to be used in the above matter is a traitor because he allows racist whites the luxury of resting assured that those black people in the ghettos are there because that is where they want to be. So we ask why should we run in Mexico only to crawl home?<sup>41</sup>

The roots of the boycott were in 1964 when black activist and comedian Dick Gregory (also once upon a time a fine college athlete in his own right) called for an international boycott of the 1964 games alongside Olympic veteran Mal Whitfield, who said in a 1963 *Ebony* magazine article, "[I]t is time for American Negro athletes to join the civil rights fight—a fight that is far from won."<sup>42</sup>

## ROOTS OF KAREEM

One of the first to get on board with OPHR was Lew Alcindor. Later known as Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Alcindor was at the time the most prominent college athlete in the United States. Alcindor dominated the basketball world as the center for John Wooden's dynastic UCLA Bruins teams. Alcindor explained to *Sports Illustrated* why he was joining the revolt:

I got more and more lonely and more and more hurt by all the prejudice and finally I made a decision. . . . I pushed to the back of my mind all the normalcies of college life and dug down deep into my black studies and religious studies. I withdrew to find myself. I made no attempt to integrate. I was consumed and obsessed by my interest in the black man, in Black Power, black pride, black courage. That, for me, would suffice. I was full of serious ideas. I could see the whole transition of the black man and his history. And I developed my first interest in Islam.<sup>43</sup>

At the founding conference for OPHR, the soft spoken Alcindor made a speech that put the crowd on their feet. He said,

I'm the big basketball star, the weekend hero, everybody's All-American. Well, last summer I was almost killed by a racist cop shooting at a black cat in Harlem. He was shooting on the street where masses of people were standing around or just taking a walk. But he didn't care. After all we were just niggers. I found out last summer that we don't catch hell because we aren't basketball stars or because we don't have money. We catch hell because we are black. Somewhere each of us have got to make a stand against this kind of thing. This is how I take my stand—using what I have. And I take my stand here.<sup>44</sup>

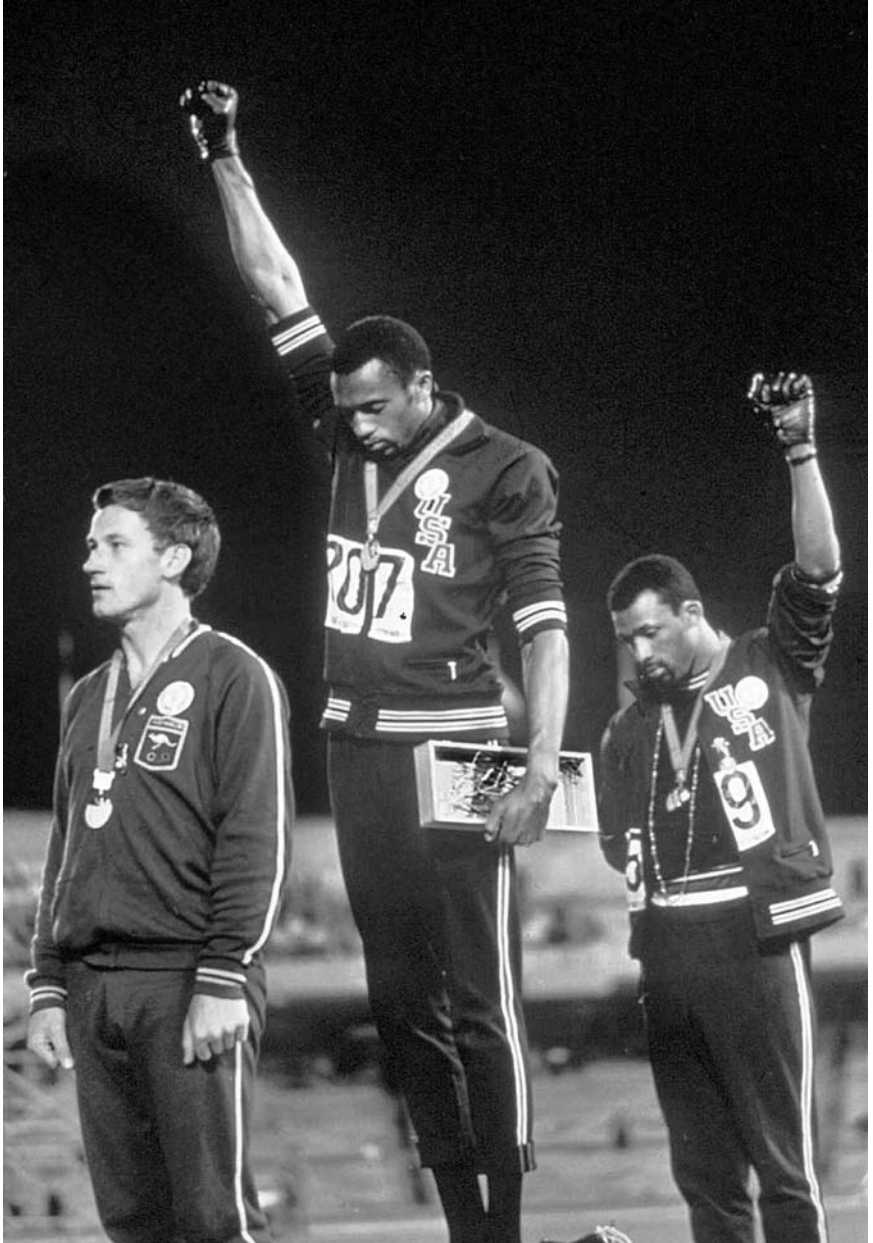
The struggle was on, and OPHR had five central demands:

1. Restore Muhammad Ali's title.
2. Remove Avery Brundage as head of the United States Olympic Committee.
3. Disinvite South Africa and Rhodesia.
4. Boycott the New York Athletic Club.
5. Hire more black coaches.<sup>45</sup>

Tommie Smith took the boycott case public in a piece entitled, "Why Negroes Should Boycott," for the March 1968 issue of *Sport*. He wrote,



Extending gloved hands skyward, United States athletes Tommie Smith (center) and John Carlos (right) stare downward during the playing of the “Star-Spangled Banner” after Smith received the gold and Carlos the bronze for the 200-meter run at the Mexico City Summer Olympic Games in this October 16, 1968, file photo. Australia’s silver medalist, Peter Norman, is at left.



*AP Photo/File*

We learn through observation and education. I know more now than I did when I was a boy. I know now, for instance, that Negroes do not have equality in the United States and do not have all of the rights supposedly granted to them by the Constitution of the United States. What is right is right. What is wrong is wrong. I recognize wrongs and I am willing to fight for right. I am not a militant. I am an extremist only where a fight for my rights as a human being are concerned. I recognize that Negroes have had greater opportunities in sports in general and the Olympics in particular than they have in any other field. . . . To emphasize my point, I have said I would give up my right arm to win a gold medal in the Olympics, but I would not give up my personal dignity. I am not entirely sure of my actions. No one could be. But I have searched my conscience and I am acting as I believe I should act. I am concerned that I may have harmed my 'image' and thus damaged the future I hope to make for my family. I would be a fool not to be concerned. But I would be less than a man if I did not act for what I believe.<sup>46</sup>

Gene Johnson, a world-class high jumper, concurred:

I would like to pose this as a question: what would be the fate of a Ralph Boston were he not a 27-foot broad jumper? Or of a Charlie Greene if he were not a 9.2 sprinter? They would be 'faceless' black men caught in the same system of racial discrimination as many other black citizens. I am proud to see that those proposing the boycott have enough social awareness to realize that this struggle of the man in Fillmore, Watts and Harlem is their struggle also. The efforts of Negroes in athletics have benefited only the athlete involved. The Civil Rights Movement or struggle requires the aid and contributions of all black men regardless of station in life. Negro athletes should not be exempt, nor should they divorce themselves from this struggle. The fact that a great sacrifice is involved such as foregoing an opportunity to participate in the Olympics points to the urgency.<sup>47</sup>

The boycott became a national debate. California Governor Ronald Reagan had harsh words for the plan: "I disapprove greatly of what Edwards is trying to accomplish. Edwards is contributing nothing toward harmony between the races." [Reagan's statement was profoundly offensive to people such as Smith, Evans, and Alcindor, who resented being represented as Edwards' puppets.] Edwards responded to Reagan by calling him "a petrified pig, unfit to govern."<sup>48</sup>

It would be wrong though to think that resistance to the boycotters came only from the "petrified pig" section of the establishment. Just as Roy

Wilkins and the 1950s Civil Rights activists had spoken against Muhammad Ali, so there was a similar backlash against the boycotters.

Black press sports writing icon Doc Young wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*,

If Tommie Smith . . . believes 'I'm nothing but a nigger' when he isn't performing on the track, then he is 'nothing but a nigger.' When one considers that millions of American Negroes have withstood the worst of Southern bigotry without ever being reduced to the acceptance of the state, what is Tommie Smith crying so much about? I have nothing but contempt for people who complain because we don't have enough heroes but who spend their time trying to destroy the showcases for which heroes are produced and displayed. The charge that 'America is as racist as South Africa' is the most extravagant lie in our times.<sup>49</sup>

But their boycott received support from none other than Jackie Robinson, who said, "I do support the individuals who decided to make the sacrifice by giving up the chance to win an Olympic medal. I respect their courage. We need to understand the reason and frustration behind these protests . . . it was different in my day—perhaps we lacked courage."<sup>50</sup>

It also received solidarity and support from Dr. King in the months before his death, through his spokesman Andrew Young, who said,

Dr. King applauds this new sensitivity among Negro athletes and public figures and he feels that this should be encouraged. Dr. King told me this represents a new spirit of concern on the part of successful Negroes for those who remain impoverished. Negro athletes may be treated with adulation during their Olympic careers, but many will face later the same slights experienced by other Negroes.<sup>51</sup>

Later, speaking for himself alongside Edwards, King gave the boycott

Absolute support. . . . This is a protest and a struggle against racism and injustice, and that is what we are working to eliminate in our organization and in our total struggle. No one looking at these demands can ignore the truth of them. Freedom always demands sacrifice and . . . they have the courage to say, 'We're going to be men and the United States of America have deprived us of our manhood, of our dignity, and our native worth, and consequently we're going to stand up and make the sacrifices.'<sup>52</sup>

Momentum built throughout the year. The assassination of Dr. King shook some of the stalwart anti-boycott athletes. Ralph Boston, the most

prominent track and field star said, “For the first time since the talks about the boycott began, I feel that I have a valid reason to boycott.” He went on to explain how he came to this realization:

I sat and thought about it and I see that if I go to Mexico City and represent the United States I would be representing people like the one that killed Dr. King. And there are more people like that. On the other hand, I feel if I don’t go and someone else wins the medal and it goes to another country, I haven’t accomplished anything either. It is disturbing when a guy cannot even talk to people and he is shot for that. It makes you think that Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown are right. All my life I felt that violence wasn’t the way to deal with the problem. How do you keep feeling this way when things like that keep coming? How?<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the year, more and more athletes were asking the same question.

Historian Douglas Hartmann writes in his book *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete*,

Nine track-and-field stars (including future gold medalist long jumper Bob Beamon) at the University of Texas at El Paso were kicked off the team by coach Wayne Vanderburge after they refused to compete with BYU in protest for the Mormon Church’s treatment of blacks. (Every edition of the *Track and Field News* that spring contained at least a couple of snippets regarding incidents of protest or discontent among top-flight black trackmen.) In July, twenty-three of the twenty-five black athletes at Iowa State announced their withdrawal from school effective August 1 because the athletic council rejected some of their eight demands—including one that called for the hiring of Negro coaches in all sports.<sup>54</sup>

A boycott looked like a possibility, but it was not to be. The wind went out of its sails for a myriad of reasons. Some felt threatened by Brundage’s stern warning: “If these boys are serious, they’re making a very bad mistake. If they’re not serious and they’re using the Olympic Games for publicity purposes, we don’t like it.” Others felt that just raising the issues was enough. But, most centrally, the insoluble problem was that athletes who had trained their whole lives for their Olympic moment—quite understandably—didn’t want to give it up.<sup>55</sup>

Track legend Rafer Johnson, in his autobiography, *The Best That I Can Be*, reflected the conflicted feelings in the 1960s some black athletes had toward the boycott and the movement itself. It is a rather clear exposition

of the double consciousness of black athletes who carry both a taste of privilege and a taste of pain. "What you have to ask yourself is, 'What good is it going to do? Is it going to help housing? Is it going to help education? Is it going to help job opportunities?' I don't see how a boycott of the Olympics is relevant at all to these problems." He also wrote about the movement as a whole: "The militant tactics of Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Angela Davis, and Malcolm X seemed divisive and destructive. Still, I was glad they were around. They dared to utter truths that others could not, and their fervor accelerated the process of social change. The larger society might have never awakened if those fierce, threatening voices had not been raised."<sup>56</sup>

John Carlos expressed to me years later his frustration about this mindset. "A lot of the athletes thought that winning medals would supercede or protect them from racism. But even if you won the medal it ain't going to save your momma. It ain't going to save your sister or children. It might give you 15 minutes of fame, but what about the rest of your life?"<sup>57</sup>

But it accomplished its goal of raising a broader awareness. As Evans said,

Harry was media savvy. He said all year that we were going to take a vote at the Olympic trials and all year there was commentary in all the newspapers. Some editors made fools of themselves. They would write, 'Look at these narrow, stupid black guys. They don't know what they're doing.' They just said things that exposed themselves to who they really were. The athletes of course voted down the boycott. I was hoping it was going to be voted down because I wanted to run in the Olympics. I knew that this would happen, that the proposal was a way for us to get leverage. Tom and I had talked about it and I said, "Let's say we're going to boycott so we can get some things done," but we all knew that we were going to run in Mexico. Push comes to shove, we were going to be there.<sup>58</sup>

One person who was not there, it must be noted, was Lew Alcindor, who staged his own one-person boycott and stayed home.

Then, on October 2, ten days before the Games opened, the Mexican security forces massacred hundreds of students in Mexico City. Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell issued a statement on Mexico and the Olympic Games, in which they said,

The Mexican government has behaved with a barbarity comparable only to the massacres carried out by occupying Nazi troops in Europe or by napalming American planes in Vietnam. Throughout the world people have been aroused to passionate anger and alarm. We express

our profound solidarity with the heroic Mexican students. We ask people, organizations and nations to boycott the Olympic games. . . . Almost immediately after this ambush–massacre occurred, the Mexican Government met with the Olympic Committee and said: ‘The intervention of the forces of order have assured calm and there will be no trouble to prevent the Olympics from taking place.’ The same day the United States State Department declared: ‘The disturbances in Mexico City affected only a small part of the population and order is now restored.’ There is a clear complicity between the United States and Mexican Governments to meet popular resistance with massacre. If the Olympic Committee agrees to hold the games in Mexico, it stands guilty of complicity in this crime.<sup>59</sup>

Although the harassment and intimidation of the OPHR athletes cannot be compared with the massacre of the students and their supporters, the intention was the same: to stifle protest. This effort to silence them came in different forms, even in the form of track legend Jesse Owens. Brundage sent Owens to discredit the Olympic rebels. As Douglas Hartmann wrote,

In Owens’s view, the boycott was nothing but “political aggrandizement,” which he condemned on the grounds that “there is no place in the athletic world for politics.” Instead, Owens claimed, “The Olympics help bridge the gap of misunderstanding of people in this country,” thus promoting “the way of American life.” In a follow-up statement published under the title “Olympics a Bastion of Non-Discrimination,” the legendary figure added that athletic scholarships help youngsters to attend the colleges of their choice.<sup>60</sup>

Owens wasn’t the only black athletic legend to come down on OPHR. His “other half” from the 1930s had something to say as well. As the *Washington Afro American* reported, “Joe Louis says colored athletes should consider themselves Americans first and colored Americans second and disagrees with those pushing for a boycott. ‘Whenever you have a chance to do something for your country you should do it,’ Louis said.”<sup>61</sup>

In Mexico City, Brundage sent Owens to talk to the track team to try to discourage them from any protest on the track. Brundage’s ear was notoriously tin. He could not have picked a worse representative.

As Lee Evans tells the story,

Jesse was confused as far as I’m concerned. The USOC dogged him and he knew they dogged him, treating him badly after his exploits in the Olympic games, when he ran [winning four gold medals in Berlin]. He came back, didn’t have a job, [was] racing horses for

money. We were really annoyed with him because he knew what we were going through yet he pretended that it didn't exist and that just blew our mind when he called a meeting with us in Mexico City. I thought he called this meeting because Avery Brundage sent him there. Jesse Owens was sitting on the fifty-yard line with all the important people of the world, the royalties, the Avery Brundages. They have a special section where they sit in the games right at the fifty-yard line, and Jesse, that's where he was sitting. He thought he was one of them. He had forgot that he was once an athlete struggling like we were. So he came and talked to us like he was Avery Brundage or the King of England or somebody and really talking stupid to us and we just shouted him out of the room. I still admire him to this day, that's why I say he was confused coming to talk to us like that because we knew that he was being victimized. He was a victim and we felt sorry for him actually. [After the events of 1968, Owens said to Smith and Carlos, "The black fist is a meaningless symbol. When you open it, you have nothing but fingers—weak, empty fingers. The only time the black fist has significance is when there's money inside. There's where the power lies."] <sup>62</sup>

It was on the second day that Smith and Carlos took their stand. First, Smith set a world record, winning the gold—and Carlos the bronze. Smith then took out the black gloves. When the silver medalist, a runner from Australia named Peter Norman, saw what was happening, he affixed an OPHR button to his chest to show his solidarity on the medal stand.

As the U.S. flag began rising up the flagpole and the anthem played, Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their fists in a black power salute. But there was more than the gloves. The two men also wore no shoes, to protest black poverty, and beads, to protest lynching. Within hours, Smith and Carlos were expelled from the Olympic Village and were said to have been stripped of their medals. Avery Brundage justified this by saying, "They violated one of the basic principles of the Olympic games: that politics play no part whatsoever in them." <sup>63</sup>

Ironically, it was Brundage's reaction that really propelled the protest into the limelight. As Red Smith, wrote, "By throwing a fit over the incident, suspending the young men and ordering them out of Mexico, the badgers multiplied the impact of the protest a hundred fold." <sup>64</sup>

In Brundage's unpublished autobiography he was still muttering about Smith and Carlos, writing, "Warped mentalities and cracked personalities seem to be everywhere and impossible to eliminate." <sup>65</sup>

But Brundage was not alone in his furious reaction. The *LA Times* accused Smith and Carlos of a "Nazi-like salute." *Time* magazine had the Olympic logo but instead of the motto "Faster, Higher, Stronger" blared

“Angrier, Nastier, Uglier.” The *Chicago Tribune* called the act “an embarrassment visited upon the country,” an “act contemptuous of the United States,” and “an insult to their countrymen.” Smith and Carlos were “renegades” who would come home to be “greeted as heroes by fellow extremists.”<sup>66</sup>

But the coup de grâce was made by a young reporter for the *Chicago American* named Brent Musberger, who wrote,

One gets a little tired of having the United States run down by athletes who are enjoying themselves at the expense of their country. Protesting and working constructively against racism in the United States is one thing, but airing one’s dirty clothing before the entire world during a fun-and-games tournament was no more than a juvenile gesture by a couple of athletes who should have known better.

He then described Smith and Carlos as “a pair of dark-skinned storm troopers.”<sup>67</sup>

But for Smith and Carlos there were no regrets. Carlos was clear on why he had to act:

I was with Dr. King ten days before he died. He told me he was sent a bullet in the mail with his name on it. I remember looking in his eyes to see if there was any fear, and there was none. He didn’t have any fear. He had love and that in itself changed my life in terms of how I would go into battle. I would never have fear for my opponent, but love for the people I was fighting for. That’s why if you look at the picture [of the raised fist] Tommie has his jacket zipped up, and Peter Norman has his jacket zipped up, but mine was open. I was representing shift workers, blue-collar people, and the underdogs. That’s why my shirt was open. Those are the people whose contributions to society are so important but don’t get recognized.<sup>68</sup>

Upon returning home, there was support for Smith and Carlos in the black community, but not the entire black community. “There was pride but only from the less fortunate. What could they do but show their pride? But we had black businessmen, we had black political caucuses, and they never embraced Tommie Smith or John Carlos. When my wife took her life in 1977 they never said, ‘Let me help.’” Carlos believes to this day that the lack of support led to his wife’s suicide. “We were under tremendous economic stress,” he told me. “I took any job I could find. I wasn’t too proud. Menial jobs, security jobs, gardener, caretaker, whatever I could do to try to make ends meet. We had four children, and some nights I would have to chop up our furniture and make a fire in the middle of our room just to



stay warm. . . . I was the bad guy, the two headed dragon-spitting fire. It meant we were alone.”<sup>69</sup>

But if Smith and Carlos were being attacked from all corners, they received immediate solidarity from their track and field allies. As Evans said, “I was very distraught. I wanted to go home. I said I wasn’t going to run. But Tommy and John—they came to me and said I better run and I better win. They came to my room and that freed my mind up to go run because I was confused, but when they told me that I should run that really freed me up.” Evans made his own statement when he and his fellow medal winners wore black berets on the medal stand. When the media asked him why, he said sarcastically that it was because it was raining. The reality was quite different. As Evans recalled,

We knew that the black beret was a symbol of the Black Panther Party. . . . I thought they were pretty brave guys, but I wouldn’t do what they were doing. They were having a shootout with the police almost every day. So my job [protesting at the Olympics] was easy. This is one of the things I learned from Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Everybody can play a part but everyone has to do something. I used to say to guys I was trying to get to come to meetings. I said, ‘It’s going to be easy for us. We’re just going to be in the Olympic games. I know some guys in Oakland shooting out with the police. So what we’re doing is nothing compared to those guys. We’re not putting our life on the line.’ But as it turned out we did put our lives on the line because I had maybe twenty death threats on my life in Mexico City. You have mailboxes in the Olympics. I had the KKK, the NRA, saying ‘Yeah we’re going to shoot you niggers.’ They even tell you what time they’re going to shoot you.

But Evans also remembers criticism from his people back home. “I had a tough time, too, because the blacks thought that I didn’t do enough and the whites were just mad. I got it from both sides. The black people thought I should have done nothing less than dynamite the victory stand. That’s the only thing that would have satisfied them, because after Tommy and John, what else could I do?”<sup>70</sup>

They also received support from unlikely sources. The Olympic Crew Team, all white and entirely from Harvard, issued the following statement:

We—as individuals—have been concerned about the place of the black man in American society in their struggle for equal rights. As members of the U.S. Olympic team, each of us has come to feel a moral commitment to support our black teammates in their efforts to dramatize the injustices and inequities which permeate our society.<sup>71</sup>

Not every athlete showed them love. Boxer George Foreman, in what was seen as a direct rebuke of Smith and Carlos, waved a small American flag to all our corners of the ring after winning heavyweight gold. This endeared him to the corporate media, but not to others. As Foreman said in 2003,

Most people thought it was great, but then something happened that caused me more pain than I ever felt as an individual. I was a happy nineteen-year-old boy, and some people came up to me in the fifth ward and said, "How can you do that when the brothers [Smith and Carlos] are trying to do their thing?" They thought I betrayed them. That people would think that caused great pain.

Foreman, unlike the track team, was given and accepted an invitation to the Nixon White House.<sup>72</sup>

OPHR and the actions of Smith and Carlos were a terrific rebuke to the hypocrisy at the heart of the Olympics. However, present was one deep flaw that was mirrored in other aspects of the New Left and Black Power movement: women were largely shut out. Many of OPHR's calls to action had statements about "reclaiming manhood," as if African American women weren't victims of racism or were incapable of being a strong voice. The foolishness of this move was quickly seen when many women athletes became major voices of solidarity after the fact. The anchor of the women's gold medal-winning 4 × 100 team, Wyomia Tyus, said, "I'd like to say that we dedicate our relay win to John Carlos and Tommie Smith." Tyus commented years later, "It appalled me that the men simply took us for granted. They assumed we had no minds of our own and that we'd do whatever we were told."<sup>73</sup>

The critiques are valid, but their efforts are immortal as a moment when the privileges of athletic glory were proudly trashed for a greater goal. Jimmy Hines, the 100-meter gold medalist in Mexico City, commenting on the effect Smith and Carlos's protest had on the 1968 Olympics in people's minds, said, "I've done maybe a thousand speaking engagements and after each I've had the question: 'Were you the ones . . . ? The ones who . . . ?' I guess that's forever."<sup>74</sup>

## NOTES

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# The Changing Face of Tennis

*Cecil Harris*

Whether they were sisters who grew up in hardscrabble Compton, California, or supremely ambitious athletes who yearned to escape the Jim Crow South, or products of middle-income families who believed that hard work, sacrifice, and respect for others produce a just reward, African Americans have entered the cloistered world of big-league tennis only to find their presence often unappreciated and their right to exist in need of strong assertion and constant protection.

Tennis in the Open era, in which players compete for prize money instead of subsisting on under-the-table payments, is only forty years old. Arthur Ashe, an African American from segregated Richmond, Virginia, won the first U.S. Open in 1968.<sup>1</sup> Because he was still an amateur player and an Army man, he could not accept the \$14,000 winner's check, but he did announce his arrival as a force in the sport and a true citizen of the world.

Ashe had to deal with the fundamental contradiction of competing in tournaments at exclusive clubs that would not consider admitting him as a member.<sup>2</sup> Yet he was able to make a fine living in tennis while inspiring others to take up the game—or at least to pay attention to it.

Professional tennis came too late for Althea Gibson, who grew up amid poverty in Silver, South Carolina, and in the unofficial capital of Black America, New York City's Harlem.<sup>3</sup> As the first African American to win major tennis championships in the 1950s, she endured even more racial animus than Ashe—and did so without being able to make a living in the sport. Gibson came of age when African Americans who cared about tennis needed a league of their own, the American Tennis Association (ATA), to develop their skills through honest competition and become champions.

The ATA was to tennis what the Negro Leagues were to baseball with one important distinction: the ATA still exists. While not as influential as it once was, the ATA has produced champions and trailblazers, and role models for future champions. One such role model was Robert Ryland, a two-time

ATA singles champion, who after winning the 1955 title in Richmond was told by a twelve-year-old Arthur Ashe, "Mr. Ryland, one day I want to be a champion like you."<sup>4</sup> Because he got a greater opportunity than Ryland, Ashe went much farther in the sport. And because the sisters Venus and Serena Williams got more of an opportunity than their kindred spirit Gibson, they have gone farther than any African Americans ever have in the quintessential country club sport.

The Williams sisters came straight out of Compton, a place immortalized with rhythmic notoriety by the 1980s gangsta rappers N.W.A. (Niggas Wit Attitude).<sup>5</sup> In a 2005 national study of America's most dangerous cities based on six crime categories, Compton came in fourth (behind St. Louis, Detroit, and Flint, Michigan).<sup>6</sup> "I wanted to live in the worst ghetto in the world so [my daughters] could see all the bad that can happen to you if you don't get an education," said their father, Richard Williams.<sup>7</sup>

How far the sisters have come since Mr. Williams watched a women's tennis final on television one afternoon in the 1980s and saw Natasha Zvereva of Belarus pocket \$75,000 for one week's work! He devised a plan. Never a tennis player himself—"a sissy sport," he called it as a young man—he soon viewed tennis the way a mid-nineteenth century prospector saw gold on the trip West. With books and video tapes, Williams and his then-wife Oracene Price, a nurse, taught themselves enough about tennis to get the girls started on a journey that conquered the sporting world.<sup>8</sup>

Venus and Serena have reached a level of stardom previously unattained by anyone in tennis, especially anyone black. We know each of them by one name. The surname need not be added; they have transcended tennis. In 2000, Venus was named "Sportswoman of the Year" by *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>9</sup> Also that year, the *Forbes* magazine Power 100 in Fame and Fortune listed Venus No. 62 and Serena No. 68.<sup>10</sup> In the spring of 2006, the Internet site [www.geniusinsight.com](http://www.geniusinsight.com) ranked the world's Top 10 female athletes based on likeability. Serena finished first, and Venus third, behind boxer Laila Ali, the daughter of Muhammad Ali.

"The Williams sisters will definitely leave a footprint,"<sup>11</sup> said James Blake, an African American who ended 2006 as the world's fourth-best player. "The Williams sisters did it in the hip-hop era. It's still very easy for kids to say, 'I don't want to play tennis. I want to be like [NBA stars] Allen Iverson and Tracy McGrady.' But the Williams sisters played tennis and made it cool."

The Williams sisters made tennis cool because they were so different—bolder, more aggressive, more athletic, more style-conscious than their tennis peers. Venus is the introvert with an almost regal sense of style, the 6-foot, 1½-inch, long-limbed power hitter with the fastest recorded serve in women's tennis history (127 mph in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1998).<sup>12</sup> Serena is the curvaceous, sometimes tempestuous, 5-foot, 10-inch extrovert, with the better all-around game and a laudable capacity for creating angles for

her lethal ground strokes. Serena pushes the fashion envelope off the table with attire such as the skin-tight “cat suit” she wore while winning the 2002 U.S. Open and the “tennis boots” (actually knee-high leather accessories removed after the on-court warm-up) she displayed at the 2004 U.S. Open.<sup>13</sup> “Nobody else would have the guts to wear something like that,” said African American player Angela Haynes, who grew up with the sisters in Compton. “As a tennis player myself, I’m thinking, ‘I wonder what Serena is going to wear at this [tournament].’ She’s got such a sense of style to her game and her fashion. That’s exciting. The fans want to see that.”<sup>14</sup>

Venus and Serena debuted in big-league tennis as beads-and-braids-wearing dynamos in the late 1990s. But decades before the sisters could make tennis cool for a new generation, another African American woman had to chart the path.

Althea Gibson excelled in basketball, football, baseball, stickball, and any other activity with the word “ball” in it even before her introduction to tennis. Power and speed in a nearly six-foot frame and a steely resolve made Gibson the most celebrated female athlete of her time—the Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year in 1957 and 1958<sup>15</sup>—even though tennis’s gatekeepers kept her out of the major tournaments until she was 23.

The first black player to be ranked No. 1 globally, Gibson achieved the rare Wimbledon–U.S. Nationals double in 1957 and 1958. (The U.S. Nationals became the U.S. Open in 1968.) Because of Althea, blacks in tennis today have the freedom to just *play*. They have the opportunity to earn \$16 million in prize money in a decade as both Serena and Venus have done.<sup>16</sup>

After years of painful and humiliating rejection, Althea gained entry into tennis’s premier events in 1950 and became the first black player to win three of the four Grand Slam tournaments: the French Open in 1956, Wimbledon in 1957 and 1958, and the U.S. Open in 1957 and 1958.<sup>17</sup>

The tennis establishment has done virtually nothing to keep alive Gibson’s legacy. The Women’s Tennis Association, established in 1970, has named no award or tournament after her. The U.S. Open, held annually in New York City where she was reared, has named no court or any section of the tennis center after the sport’s first African American champion.

A partial list of the honors bestowed upon Gibson includes:

- International Tennis Hall of Fame
- Babe Zaharias Outstanding Woman Athlete in 1957 and 1958
- Sports Illustrated Top 100 Greatest Female Athletes
- International Scholar-Athletes Hall of Fame

As a girl, Althea’s paddle tennis prowess caught the eye of Buddy Walker, a Harlem bandleader. Walker gave Althea her first racquet, a second-hand model with real strings, for \$5. When Althea was fifteen, her family could

Althea Gibson prepares to volley against Ann Haydon during the Wimbledon womens singles semi-final tennis match in the All England Lawn in Wimbledon, 1958. Gibson won 6-2, 6-0, after only 30 minutes of play.



*AP Photo*

not afford the \$7 annual membership fee at the black-owned Cosmopolitan Tennis Club, so she became an honorary member.<sup>18</sup> Althea met her first tennis coach, a one-armed man named Fred Johnson, through contacts at the Cosmopolitan.<sup>19</sup> He tutored Althea at the club and at the Harlem River Courts that today bear his name.



Blacks were at that time barred from all events sanctioned by the United States Lawn Tennis Association (now the USTA).<sup>20</sup> Without playing in USLTA tournaments, no black could acquire the credentials to compete in the four Grand Slam events: Wimbledon, the Australian Open, the French Open, and the U.S. Nationals. Hence Gibson made her name in the ATA.

At the 1946 ATA tournament in Wilberforce, Ohio, she was observed by Dr. Robert Walter Johnson of Lynchburg, Virginia, and Dr. Hubert Eaton of Wilmington, North Carolina.<sup>21</sup> Both were enamored with her speed, athleticism, and sheer power. Her game lacked technical proficiency, but the doctors raved about her potential. Once they found out that Althea was eighteen, had not attended high school in years, and lacked social graces, she became their pet project—someone who could, if given the opportunity, change the face of tennis. She lived with the Eaton family during the academic year to finish high school and spent the summer at the Johnson home, where she could play on his backyard clay court and train with other players as part of the Junior Development Program he founded for the ATA. She became the most dominant female player in ATA history, winning a record ten consecutive singles titles from 1947 to 1956.<sup>22</sup>

In June 1950, in an open letter in *American Lawn Tennis Magazine*, white tennis great Alice Marble lobbied for Gibson's inclusion in major tournaments. "If tennis is a sport for ladies and gentlemen, it's also time we acted a little more like gentle people and less like sanctimonious hypocrites," Marble wrote.<sup>23</sup>

Gibson's greatness in major tournaments surfaced after the State Department sent her on a goodwill tour with three white pros in 1955.<sup>24</sup> She excelled on the international circuit, winning nine consecutive tournaments and fifteen of eighteen in an eight-month span. She won the French Open in 1956 before her aforementioned triumphs at Wimbledon and the U.S. Nationals.

"She had great presence and I could tell the other women were intimidated by her," said Billie Jean King, who in 1956 was a thirteen-year-old Californian with the surname Moffitt when she first saw Gibson. "With her wingspan, power and shot production, she was awesome. She mixed power and spin and had great placement. She seemed to glide on the court. She had a big serve and in those days you had to keep one foot on the ground when you served. Today's players don't realize that."<sup>25</sup>

Gibson was playing not only for herself, but also for African Americans collectively, who took special pride in her achievements, although her reluctance to acknowledge this made her less popular with them than she should have been. She once wrote:

I have always enjoyed a good press among the regular American newspapers and magazines, but I am uncomfortably close to being Public Enemy No. 1 to some sections of the Negro press. I have, they have

said, an unbecoming attitude. They say I'm bigheaded, uppity, ungrateful, and a few other uncomplimentary things. I don't think any white writer ever has said anything like that about me, but quite a few Negro writers have, and I think the deep-down reason for it is that they resent my refusal to turn my tennis achievements into a rousing crusade for racial equality, brass band, seventy-six trombones, and all. I won't do it. I feel strongly that I can do more good my way than I could by militant crusading. I want my success to speak for itself as an advertisement for my race.<sup>26</sup>

By the time Venus debuted at the 1997 U.S. Open, however, both the player and her African American tennis peers were clear about what the 17-year-old prodigy represented. "Venus is out there playing for the African American race," said Zina Garrison, a former world Top 10 player. "It's an all-white sport. You feel it, are made to feel it, like you don't belong."<sup>27</sup> "The game itself is not really an inviting place for people of color," said Kim Sands, another former player who once coached tennis at her alma mater, the University of Miami. "There just aren't enough people of color who are successful in tennis where it becomes like the [National Basketball Association] or the [National Football League]. Tennis isn't like those sports in that you might not all be from the same background or you might not all be highly educated, but there are enough people in the sport who look like you and are successful. That makes the NBA and the NFL comfortable places to be for a black athlete, even though the players are not all of the same status. There's an African American culture in the NBA and the NFL. There is no African American culture in tennis. There's not a variety of our race represented in tennis. So it's not really an inviting place to hang around. It's as if they keep trying to find a way to block us out instead of including us more. In tennis, the color line is what separates us. Players can be from Sweden, Russia, Belgium, wherever, but they're all white and they all gravitate toward each other. They don't feel like they're alone. Their color is the common denominator."<sup>28</sup>

The Williams sisters have each other, and their families and friends for support. When Gibson reigned in the 1950s, she was truly alone. Still, she had her successes, on and off the court. On July 12, 1957, a week after her first Wimbledon championship, New York City gave her a ticker-tape parade along the Canyon of Heroes, up the streets of Broadway.<sup>29</sup> She made the cover of Time magazine on August 26, 1957. She released an album of jazz and blues standards, *Althea Gibson Sings*, in 1958. Twice she sang on "The Ed Sullivan Show." She was a panelist on "What's My Line?" and played a servant girl in a John Wayne film, *The Horse Soldiers*.<sup>30</sup> However, no pro tennis tour existed then, and Gibson struggled financially.

"After 10 years of [tennis], I am still a poor Negress," she told a New York newspaper, "as poor as when I was picked off the base streets of Harlem and given a chance to work myself up to stardom. I have traveled to many countries, in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in comfort. I have stayed in the best hotels and met many rich people. I am much richer in knowledge and experience. But I have no money."<sup>31</sup>

Gibson left competitive tennis after the 1958 U.S. Open and traveled the country as a warm-up act for the Harlem Globetrotters, "the clown princes of basketball."<sup>32</sup> A men's pro tennis circuit began in 1959, enabling Ryland, her friend from the ATA, to become the first black tennis professional.<sup>33</sup> But the promoter had no interest in women.

Gibson played Pauline Betz in 1960 in an event billed as the "World Pro Tennis Championships" at Cleveland Arena in 1959. But the event failed at the box office. Althea's sources of income were \$75 a month from Henry C. Lee Sporting Goods, which manufactured her racquets, and \$25,000 a year as an endorser of Tip-Top bread.<sup>34</sup>

In 1963 she became the first black on the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour, playing in 171 LPGA events between 1963 and 1977 and winning none. "When I turned pro, I thought I'd set the world on fire," she said. "It didn't work out that way. I hit the ball a ton, 275, 285 yards, but I never knew where it was going."<sup>35</sup>

Gibson was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1971, having won fifty-six singles and doubles titles. Her eleven Grand Slam titles include five in singles, five in doubles and one in mixed doubles. And it should be noted that even after Gibson was permitted to play in major tournaments as a singles player in 1950, racism kept her out of the U.S. Nationals doubles championships until 1957.<sup>36</sup> (The doubles event was held at the Longwood Cricket Club in Boston, which refused to invite her.) She died of respiratory failure on September 28, 2003 at age 76.

Although she inspired many to become interested in tennis, Gibson's successes did not eliminate the factors that kept many African Americans from embracing the sport: lack of access to courts, insufficient funds for coaching and travel, and a cultural reluctance to play a "white" sport.

"There's a reason why there's not many blacks in tennis," former tennis pro Arthur Carrington said in 1973. "It's rough. It's like pioneering. We can't say Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe have opened the doors because no one has followed them up. We have to do it all over again."<sup>37</sup>

A quarter-century later, the Williams sisters emerged to inspire African Americans, and each other. Were it not for Venus, the elder sister by one year, three months, and nine days, Serena would not have been—could not have been—nearly so successful. Serena, with her eight Grand Slam singles titles, six Grand Slam doubles titles, one Olympic gold medal, two Grand Slam mixed doubles titles, and designation as the world's premiere player

for fifty-seven weeks, needed the path cleared by Venus, the winner of six Grand Slam singles titles, two Olympic gold medals, six Grand Slam doubles titles, and two Grand Slam mixed doubles titles, and the world's top-ranked player for eleven weeks.<sup>38</sup>

Richard Williams and Oracene Price shielded their daughters from the junior tennis circuit with its jealousies and infighting among stage parents, preferring to have them train with each other before taking on the women—not that tennis was ever truly ready for them.<sup>39</sup> The 1997 U.S. Open semifinals provided vivid evidence that an African American player, especially one as talented as Venus, would not be embraced or welcomed by the sport's old guard.

The women's locker room was already a frosty place, with the white players viewing the talented newcomer with an unmistakable contempt. "I smiled at her and she didn't smile back," said Lindsay Davenport, a white star from Southern California, who made Venus's perpetual game face sound like a punishable offense.<sup>40</sup> Venus's semifinal-round foe, Irina Spirlea of Romania, told reporters earlier in the tournament that Venus was not friendly in the locker room and acted like she was better than the other players.<sup>41</sup> Soon those players would find out that she was.

A black person who is not deferential can be intimidating to those who expect black people to act intimidated. That helps to explain Spirlea deliberately bumping Venus on their way to the chairs during the third set of the match, in full view of 23,000 spectators and millions of television viewers. Venus said nary a word. She merely sat and read the notes prepared by her parents/coaches: where to serve, what shots to play, and the importance of maintaining one's poise.

After Venus showed enough talent and grit to stave off two match points and win the match, 7–6, 4–6, 7–6, Spirlea whined to the media when asked about the bump. "I'm not going to move," she said defiantly. "She never tries to turn. She thinks she's the fucking Venus Williams."<sup>42</sup>

Richard Williams said afterward that Spirlea would have been knocked out had she bumped Serena that way.<sup>43</sup> It is likely that Gibson would have floored her as well. But Venus displays a steely outer shell reminiscent of Ashe, after whom the U.S. Open's main court is named.

Reflecting on his childhood in Virginia, Ashe once said, "What infuriated me most was having a white Richmond type come up to me somewhere in the world and say, 'I saw you play at Byrd Park when you were a kid.' Nobody saw me play at Byrd Park, because when I was a kid it was for whites only."<sup>44</sup>

Once he got onto tennis's grandest stages, Ashe achieved many significant firsts: first black man to win the U.S. Open; first player to win the U.S. Nationals and U.S. Open in the same year; first black to win the Australian Open; first black man to win the Wimbledon championship; first black to

compete on the U.S. Davis Cup team; first black to captain the U.S. Davis Cup team. (The Davis Cup is an annual international tournament.) In 1981, the U.S. defeated Argentina in the Cup final. With Ashe again as captain in 1982, America won another Cup, defeating France in the final.<sup>45</sup>

Ashe was instrumental in the formation of the Association of Tennis Professionals, which runs the men's pro tour, becoming the ATP president in 1974. Combining a love of the game with a high regard for education, he founded the National Junior Tennis League, served as chairman of the Black Tennis and Sports Foundation, and teamed with tennis coach Nick Bolletieri to form the Ashe Bolletieri Cities program, which in 1990 was renamed the Arthur Ashe Safe Passage Foundation, a program designed to introduce inner-city youth to tennis while stressing discipline, academic instruction, and life-sustaining skills.<sup>46</sup> The Safe Passage Foundation has branches in ten cities. Black California teenagers Brittany Augustine and Asia Muhammad have emerged from the Safe Passage program to become a world-ranked junior girls' doubles team.

Intelligent, poised, and well-spoken, yet fiercely independent, Ashe represented America at its best. He cultivated a nice-guy image, for he knew it was needed to enable blacks to make further inroads in a segregated sport.

"Sure, I get fed up being the nice guy," he said in 1985, "but back in the '60s if you were black and the first one, you simply had to behave yourself. I couldn't have gotten away with coming on like [Muhammad] Ali—it wouldn't have been tolerated. I genuinely believe that if [John] McEnroe were black, he wouldn't be allowed to do some of the things he does."<sup>47</sup>

Ashe played with a quiet intensity, a stoicism neither seen in his sport before nor duplicated since. His demeanor rarely betrayed whether he was ahead in a match or behind. His trance-like states of meditation during stoppages of play were primers on how to get the utmost out of one's ability. Issues of social justice consumed Ashe. He did not merely complain about the plight of an oppressed African majority in South Africa; he took action. After years of political wrangling, Ashe received a visa to visit apartheid South Africa in 1973. There, he integrated the South African Open.<sup>48</sup>

"That trip was the start of change in South Africa—very small change," said Ray Moore, a white South African player. "It was like Rosa Parks refusing to get up from her seat on the bus [in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955]. It was one small act that would have a much bigger impact."<sup>49</sup> Ashe set several conditions for his trip that were approved by the South African government: (1) there would be no segregated audiences at the tournament in Johannesburg; (2) he would not have "honorary white" status but rather be recognized as a black man; (3) he would not have to stay in a segregated area; and (4) he could go anywhere he pleased and say anything he wanted. He met with banned "colored" poet Don Matera, who convinced

Arthur Ashe, right, shakes hands with his opponent, Jimmy Connors, after defeating him in the final match of the men's singles championship at Wimbledon in 1975.



*AP Photo*

him that despite criticism from some blacks the trip had had a positive impact.<sup>50</sup> He also influenced other blacks to boycott South Africa.

"I asked Arthur what South Africa was like because I had considered going there for a tournament," Kim Sands said. "He told me being in South Africa was like stuffing yourself with twenty pancakes and then having to eat twenty more. It just made you totally sick inside. After hearing that, I didn't go."<sup>51</sup>

Ashe the activist did not overshadow Ashe the athlete. On July 5, 1975, he played the perfect match, dismantling the world's top-ranked player, Jimmy Connors, in the Wimbledon final. The victory by scores of 6-1, 6-1, 5-7, 6-4 served as a primer for how to use spins, slices, and precision serves and volleys to neutralize a harder-hitting opponent. It was Ashe's only win against the Hall of Famer Connors in seven career matches.<sup>52</sup> While receiving his Wimbledon hardware (the men's champion gets three trophies), Ashe reflected on two instrumental men who were not there: his father, Arthur Ashe Sr., and his tennis mentor, Dr. Johnson.

Arthur Ashe Sr. was a police officer in charge of Brook Park, the park for blacks in Richmond.<sup>53</sup> The park had four tennis courts. At age seven, Arthur Jr. learned the game from Ronald Charity, a player at historically

black Virginia Union University. Young Arthur showed such prowess and uncommon poise that Charity introduced him to Dr. Johnson of the ATA. It was not unusual for Arthur to have to serve 500 balls before breakfast and another 500 afterward. And he had chores, as did all of Dr. Johnson's pupils. Chores included smoothing the clay court and picking up trash. The idea was to build in Arthur mental toughness and endurance. Dr. Johnson told him, "Don't be as strong or as tough as those white boys. Be stronger. Be tougher."<sup>54</sup>

Arthur won ATA championships in the twelve-and-under, fourteen-and-under, and sixteen-and-under divisions, and in 1960 he became the first black male to win the U.S. Nationals and Interscholastic and U.S. Nationals Indoor titles. "I played in clubs where the only blacks were waiters, gardeners, and busboys," he said. "The game had a history and tradition I was expected to assimilate, but much of that history and many of those traditions were hostile to me."<sup>55</sup>

Ashe earned All-America status at UCLA playing under renowned coach J. D. Morgan. While at UCLA, he took ROTC training and was Lt. Arthur Ashe Jr. in 1968 when he won the U.S. Open. His victory over Tom Okker of the Netherlands, 14–12, 5–7, 6–3, 3–6, 6–3, made him the world's top-ranked amateur.<sup>56</sup> He rose to No. 2 as a pro in 1976.

However, being an African American in tennis meant enduring some racial slights. In 1966, the U.S. vs. Mexico matches scheduled for the Dallas Country Club had to be moved because club members objected to having a black man on the team. The matches were played in Samuel Grant Park, a public facility.<sup>57</sup> Ten years later, Ashe played against Ilie Nastase of Romania in the final of a nationally televised tournament in Hawaii.<sup>58</sup> "At one point, Nastase was losing and he said, 'That goddamn nigger,'" NBC broadcaster Bud Collins remembered. "Everybody on television heard it because we had microphones around. But nobody in the stadium heard it. He said it pretty softly. Ashe was shocked, but he didn't get angry. He said later, 'That's Ilie. You never know what he's going to say.'"<sup>59</sup>

Ashe and Nastase were friends and neighbors in the Westchester County, NY, suburb of Mount Kisco, where Ashe lived with his wife, Jeanne, a former NBC photographer he met at a United Negro College Fund benefit, and their daughter, Camera.<sup>60</sup>

On July 31, 1979, Ashe suffered a heart attack in New York City. He attempted a comeback several months later only to retire for good at age thirty-six after a second heart attack. He underwent surgeries in 1979 and 1983.<sup>61</sup> During one of those procedures, he received tainted blood that caused him to contract AIDS.

Many former players, including Sands, Rodney Harmon, Luke Jensen, Traci Green, and Hall of Famer Yannick Noah, cite Ashe as an inspirational figure in their careers. Said Harmon, now the director of tennis for the

Association of Tennis Professionals tour, “Arthur was not the kind of person who would publicize what he was doing to help other black players. That was not his way. He did what he thought was right in a quiet, thoughtful way. There were black players that he helped financially, but he did it without wanting any publicity. It’s so easy for people who didn’t go as far in tennis as they think they should have to say that Arthur didn’t help other blacks. But I can tell you as a black man myself and as a former player that Arthur was very helpful to me.”<sup>62</sup>

On September 9, 1992, fewer than five months before his death, Ashe was arrested outside the White House as part of a protest march against America’s treatment of Haitians seeking asylum to escape the violence in their country. Handcuffed and escorted into a police van, he wore a T-shirt that read, HAITIANS LOCKED OUT BECAUSE THEY’RE BLACK, with the word HAITIANS superimposed onto an American map.<sup>63</sup>

Ashe died of AIDS on February 6, 1993 at age 49.

Arthur Ashe Stadium exists today in tribute to a gentleman and revolutionary who stood for fairness and against injustice, a trailblazer who carried his competitive zeal into battles outside the sports arena, and outside the narrow parameters in which others expected a black man to operate. The stadium named for Ashe is where Venus and Serena have had their greatest tennis triumphs on American soil. Venus won U.S. Open titles there in 2000 and 2001 (the latter against Serena), and Serena became U.S. Open champion in 1999 and 2002 (against Venus).

Venus became world champion on February 25, 2002, and Serena replaced her at the summit on July 8, 2002. A Williams sister stood atop the world rankings until Kim Clijsters of Belgium assumed the top spot on August 11, 2003. At the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, Venus won the gold medal in singles and partnered with Serena to win the doubles gold medal. They also played against each other in six of the ten Grand Slam tournament finals from 1999 to 2003.<sup>64</sup>

The two most watched major tennis matches in American history involved Venus and Serena: the 2001 and 2002 U.S. Open finals. CBS aired both Grand Slam title matches in prime time, a first for tennis. The 2001 match drew an audience of 22.7 million viewers; the following year’s match attracted 20.1 million.<sup>65</sup>

The years of 2002 and 2003 represent an untouchable phase for Serena: She could neither be defeated nor outshone on a tennis court. From June 2002 to January 2003, she earned the Suzanne Langlen Cup for winning the French Open on the slow red clay of the Stade Roland Garros in Paris. She captured the Venus Rosewater Dish for winning the Championships at Wimbledon on the lush green grass of the All-England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club outside London. She clutched the silver trophy from Tiffany’s that is awarded to the champion of the U.S. Open on the



asphalt courts of New York. And she seized the Daphne Akhurst Cup as the winner of the Australian Open on the rubberized hard courts of Melbourne. Only six players in tennis history have held all four major titles simultaneously (Rod Laver of Australia, twice; Don Budge; Maureen Connolly; Margaret Court of Australia; Steffi Graf of Germany; and Serena). Serena is the only African American on that illustrious list.<sup>66</sup>

However, tennis historians do not recognize Serena's achievement as a Grand Slam, because she did not win the four tournaments in the same calendar year. No problem, she said. "I call it the Serena Slam," she told reporters. "I'm starting a new tradition."<sup>67</sup> If not a tradition, the Serena Slam has become a symbol of her preeminence in tennis. Billie Jean King never won all four majors in succession. Neither did Chris Evert. Neither did Gibson. And neither did Evonne Goolagong, an Aborigine from the Australian outback who won a Grand Slam title, became No. 1 in the world and was inducted as a member of the International Tennis Hall of Fame.<sup>68</sup>

Serena and Venus have set a lofty standard by which all future champions will be judged. On February 28, 1999, Serena prevailed in the Paris Indoors tournament and Venus captured the Oklahoma City title, marking the first time that sisters won pro tennis titles on the same day. Exactly one month later, Venus beat Serena 6-1, 4-6, 6-4 in Key Biscayne, Florida, the first time sisters met in a tour final in the Open era (since 1968).

On April 22, 1999, Serena cracked the world Top 10, making her and Venus the first sisters to be ranked in the Top 10 since Manuela and Katerina Maleeva of Bulgaria in 1991. When Venus ascended to the No. 1 ranking, she became the first African American to do so in the Open era. Venus and Serena, in that order, became Nos. 1 and 2 in the world for the first time on June 10, 2002. No other siblings, male or female, have ever accomplished that.<sup>69</sup>

From the 1999 U.S. Open through the 2003 U.S. Open—a span of thirteen Grand Slam events—the sisters in combination won ten Grand Slam events:

- Grand Slam titles by Serena, 1999–2003: U.S. Open in 1999 and 2003; Wimbledon in 2002 and 2003; French Open in 2002; Australian Open in 2003.
- Grand Slam titles by Venus, 1999–2003: U.S. Open in 2000 and 2001; Wimbledon in 1999 and 2000.

As impressive as these achievements are, had Serena and Venus been born in the first half of the twentieth century, their opportunities for worldwide fame and fortune would have been severely limited, if not completely dashed, because of racism. The most prestigious title to which they could have aspired would have been ATA champion.

The ATA, a not-for-profit organization since its inception, began in 1916. Yet African Americans played tennis in the Eastern and Northern states before the turn of the nineteenth century. Professors at historically black Tuskegee Institute in Alabama brought the game to the South. W. W. Walker, a Philadelphia minister, sponsored the first interstate tennis tournament for blacks in 1898. Edgar Brown is credited with introducing topspin—hitting on top of the ball to produce a higher and trickier bounce—to black players around 1900. White tennis clubs remained closed to blacks, but tennis became the sport of the black elite—doctors, lawyers, professors, businessmen—who started their own clubs. Representatives from more than a dozen black clubs met on November 30, 1916, in Washington, D.C., to create the ATA. Its mission:

- Give black tennis enthusiasts a place to play the game and socialize.
- Hold an annual tournament.
- Promote the game among other blacks.<sup>70</sup>

Although black-led, the ATA is open to all ethnicities. At the first ATA tournament, in Baltimore in 1917, Tally Holmes won the men's singles, Lucy Slowe the women's singles, and Holmes and Sylvester Smith the men's doubles.<sup>71</sup>

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were the venues for the early ATA tournaments, schools such as Wilberforce University, the oldest private African American university in the country; Central State University, also in Wilberforce; Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia; Tuskegee Institute; Lincoln University, in Lincoln, Pennsylvania; and South Carolina State University, in Orangeburg. Because ATA competitors often brought their families, children were made aware of black college campuses at an early age, and the schools provided lodging and meals for blacks in an era when public accommodations, particularly in the South, were segregated. The HBCUs also benefited from having potential donors from the black elite visit their campuses.<sup>72</sup>

The ATA tournament was covered each year by the leading black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Afro-American* chain that served several cities. ATA champions became known in the black communities. Images of these stars have been lost over time. But their names should not be forgotten:

- Holmes won singles titles in 1917, 1918, 1921, and 1924, and was said to have smooth strokes and a great backhand.
- Brown, the champion in 1922, 1923, 1928, and 1929, was a master of topspin and a versatile shot-maker.

- Ted Thompson, the champion in 1925 and 1927, was considered to have a superb forehand slice.
- Dr. Reginald Weir starred at City College of New York and won the ATA title in 1931, 1932, 1933, 1937, and 1942. He was the first African American to play in the USLTA National Indoor Championships in 1948, losing to top-seeded Tony Trabert, the eventual champion and a future Hall of Famer.
- Ora Washington of Philadelphia, nearly six feet tall, won seven straight singles titles from 1929 to 1935 and another in 1937. She teamed with three different partners to win twelve doubles crowns between 1925 and 1936. She used an unusual grip, leaving space between her right hand and the end of the racquet (not unlike a baseball player “choking up” on the bat), and she rarely took a full swing, preferring to slice the ball.
- Isadore Channels, Lula Ballard, and Flora Lomax each won four ATA singles titles in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Margaret and Roumania Peters—known as “Pete” and “Re-pete”—won four consecutive ATA titles from 1938 to 1941 and a remarkable ten consecutive titles between 1944 and 1953. Crowds clamored to see them play in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. In 1944, Gene Kelly, the famed actor and dancer, watched the sisters while in town to shoot a film. Everyone learned how close the sisters were when Margaret, a year older, waited for Roumania to finish high school so they could attend Tuskegee together. The Women’s Tennis Association paid tribute to the Peters sisters during the 2003 Federation Cup matches in Washington, D.C.<sup>73</sup>

Within the ATA, players were accepted and respected. The insidious practices that commonly affected black players in USTA events, such as being defaulted from a tournament because of being purposely given an incorrect starting time, were nonexistent in the ATA.

Among the ATA-developed black players to eventually win pro tournaments or achieve world rankings on the pro tour were Kim Sands, Leslie Allen, Zina Garrison, Lori McNeil, Juan Farrow, Arthur Carrington, Lex Carrington, Rodney Harmon, MaliVai Washington, Mashona Washington, Michaela Washington, Katrina Adams, Camille Benjamin, Chip Hooper, Renee Blount, Marcel Freeman, Bruce Foxworth, and Diane Morrison. Morrison shot to the World Top 50 as a tour rookie in 1981 only to find that the tennis life held less appeal for him than a medical career. As Dr. Diane Shropshire, she became the first African American anesthesiologist at Pennsylvania Hospital.<sup>74</sup>

How gratifying it is to have such a choice, rather than be told what is prohibited because of race—how satisfying to not be banned from a tournament

because of race, or to exercise the option the Williams family had—and effectively boycott a tournament.

Neither Venus nor Serena has played at the Pacific Life Open in Indian Wells, California, since 2001. The sisters were scheduled to compete in a semifinal match against each other—something they have long been reluctant to do because of the strong bond between them. Less than a minute before match time, Venus withdrew, citing right knee tendonitis, an injury of which tournament officials and the media said they had been unaware.

A capacity crowd of 16,100 booed Venus's decision, and the media grilled her about the sudden withdrawal. Some media types and tour players even speculated aloud that Richard Williams had ordered Venus to pull out to boost the career of Serena, the lower-ranked player at the time. It is a charge the Williams family has consistently, and vehemently, denied. Nevertheless Serena, who was awarded the victory by default, was booed lustily before, during, and after winning the Pacific Life Open championship match against Clijsters, a Belgian.<sup>75</sup> When Richard and Venus walked to their courtside seat for the title match, they were booed. Furthermore, Richard Williams said he was called "nigger" by a spectator.<sup>76</sup> No one has come forward to substantiate his account, but his claim remains. Despite repeated overtures from the tournament director, the Williams family has not returned to the event—the third-largest American tournament in tennis after the U.S. Open and the Sony Ericsson Open. It is a choice the family has made. For the twentieth-century champions of the ATA, whose very careers were circumscribed by racism, choosing which multimillion-dollar tournaments to play and which to ignore would have been unimaginable.

The ATA and its annual tournament endures. The 2007 champions were crowned at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, home of the U.S. Open.<sup>77</sup> However, the ATA's influence among young blacks has been lessened greatly by the USTA's diversity programs and the USTA's influence in the sport. For instance, a teenager with only a high ATA ranking will not get scholarship offers from major colleges, but a highly ranked USTA teenager will.

As contemporary African American tennis superstars, Serena and Venus cast a giant shadow. Black players in future generations—females in particular—will be compared to them. If today's tennis aspirants know of Gibson at all, it is from a documentary, a book, or a postage stamp. The same is becoming true of Ashe the player—not merely the name on a stadium. In the years between the reign of Gibson and Ashe and the ascension of Venus and Serena, other black players have managed to leave marks of success.

The most successful was Yannick Noah. In 1971 Ashe spotted him as an eleven-year-old in Cameroon playing tennis with a wooden plank. Ashe called Phillippe Charrier, president of the French Tennis Federation, who

Venus Williams, early 2000s



*Photofest*

enrolled Yannick in a tennis academy in Nice. Noah grew to 6 feet and 4 inches, with the kind of physique and athletic ability that blacks to this day are more likely to showcase in football, basketball, soccer, boxing, or track and field. Noah developed into a spectacular shot-maker, the 1983 French Open champion, a Davis Cup champion, and a Hall of Famer.<sup>78</sup>

In 2008, a pair of black Frenchmen, Gael Monfils and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, are following in Noah's footsteps. Tsonga, who bears a resemblance to a young Muhammad Ali, used an enticing blend of power, speed, finesse, and athleticism to reach the final of the 2008 Australian Open. He handily defeated such highly ranked players as Andy Murray of Britain, Richard Gasquet of France, and world's number two-ranked Rafael Nadal of Spain before losing a tough four-set title match to Novak Djokovic of

Serbia.<sup>79</sup> Monfils, a lanky 6–3 with chocolate-brown skin, spiked hair, and a hawk's wingspan, won the Wimbledon, French Open, and Australian Open junior titles before turning pro in 2004.<sup>80</sup>

Leading the pack among African American male players is James Blake. The offspring of an African American man and a white British woman, Blake began 2008 as the world's twelfth-ranked player.<sup>81</sup> But that's a step backward for Blake, who ended 2006 ranked fourth. In 2006 he achieved world Top 10 status for the first time, won a career-high five tournament titles, reached a career-best seven ATP Tour finals, and became the top-ranked American.<sup>82</sup>

No black man had been ranked as high as Blake since Noah was ranked third globally in 1986. Blake is one of only four African Americans to win an ATP Tour event in the open era, joining Ashe, Bryan Shelton (now the women's coach at Georgia Tech), and MaliVai Washington.

Blake now sports a bald dome replacing the flowing dreadlocks he once wore, a look that once prompted others to confuse him with his similarly long-haired brother, Thomas. Whether Hirsute or not, Blake cuts a handsome figure on court. He left Harvard University after his sophomore year, having earned Ivy League Player of the Year honors, and signed with IMG Models before establishing himself as a pro.

Despite a strong serve, a lethal forehand and a sprinter's speed, Blake has yet to advance past the quarterfinals in a Grand Slam event. Were it not for his pivotal role in helping the U.S. defeat Russia in December 2007 for its first Davis Cup title in twelve years, Blake's career could fairly be labeled disappointing.<sup>83</sup> His on-court results have not generated nearly as much interest as his personal triumph over adversity.

On May 6, 2004, at the AMS Roma tournament in Italy, Blake fractured vertebrae in his neck while trying to retrieve a shot during a practice session with fellow American Robby Ginepri. At the time, Blake's father, Thomas Blake Sr., was stricken with cancer. Blake recovered from the neck injury in two months, but when his father succumbed in a Connecticut hospital, the pain lingered. Stress paralyzed the left side of his face. He could neither close his left eye nor hear from his left ear. Walking became a struggle.<sup>84</sup> When Blake returned to the tour in 2005, his world ranking had plummeted to 210th, although he had been ranked 23rd before his injuries.

Among tennis's most gentlemanly players, Blake benefited from wild cards—free passes into tournaments based on a player's popularity or relationship with a sponsor—and gradually worked his way into the Top 10—wild cards get players into big tournaments, but they still have to win. Blake won events in 2005 in New Haven and Stockholm and reached the final in Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Open quarters, rising to No. 24.<sup>85</sup> He told his comeback story to Oprah Winfrey, David Letterman, *60 Minutes*, *Nightline*,

*People*, *Esquire*, and *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>86</sup> His 2007 autobiography, *Breaking Back*, became a *New York Times* best seller. Yet Blake is still chasing that elusive major tournament title.

Aside from Ashe, the only African American male to reach a Grand Slam final is MaliVai Washington, the Wimbledon runner-up (to Dutchman Richard Krajicek) in 1996. Knee problems forced the retirement of the muscular Washington, who won four pro tournaments and attained a career-best world ranking of No. 11 in 1992.<sup>87</sup>

Washington is one of four children of William and Christine Washington of Flint, Michigan, to become tennis pros. No other tennis family can top that. The other tennis-playing Washingtons are daughters Michaela (now retired) and Mashona and son Mashiska.

William Washington, a retired auto worker who at one time coached each of his children, is critical of the U.S. Tennis Association's preference for sending promising black youngsters to regional tennis academies. "Tennis is a family sport," he said. "Your support system is your family. You don't take a black child away from his family and familiar surroundings and put him in an environment where he's the only black child, or one of the very few, around all these white people, so the child is made to feel different and uncomfortable. The USTA will take a promising black player and assign just anybody to coach that kid. Black kids taken out of their family structure and turned over to the USTA are not going to make it."<sup>88</sup>

Washington argues that Venus and Serena made it because their parents rejected the tennis academy system and severely limited the number of junior tournaments the sisters could play. John Wilkerson, a respected African American coach, agrees with Washington.

"These academies kill our people," said Wilkerson, the 1972 ATA singles champion. "You bring people together from different backgrounds and teach them the same thing? They are not the same people. The individuality is lost. That black child's sense of who he or she is, the cultural identity is lost."<sup>89</sup>

Wilkerson ran a tennis program in a public park in Houston that in the 1980s turned Zina Garrison and Lori McNeil into Top 10 players. "It was a highly disciplined program," said McNeil, who now coaches for the USTA. "We played tennis seven days a week, and we had several coaches. But John was definitely in charge. He emphasized the mental side of the game. You had to be able to think your way through a match and be mentally tough and know how to handle difficult situations."<sup>90</sup>

In describing his program, Wilkerson explained, "We start the kids at age four. From ages four to six, we just let them hit the ball and enjoy it. From ages seven to twelve, we teach them how to understand themselves and their environment, how past situations dictate who they are and how they're going to respond to whatever happens to them in life. If you're black, you're

going to be dealing with some tough situations as a racial minority in this country. And you have to be able to handle those situations.”<sup>91</sup>

Garrison and McNeil, born thirty-two days apart in 1963,<sup>92</sup> had to handle discriminatory treatment at junior events in Texas. Garrison once heard a tournament official say, “Throw the niggers in the same bracket.” Doing so prevented two black players from facing each other for the championship.<sup>93</sup> Even after Garrison won the 1981 Wimbledon junior title, the USTA put her on a list of alternates for the U.S. Open junior event, meaning she would not be able to compete unless another American girl withdrew. Fortunately for her, a player pulled out—and she won the title.

“That was my first brush with USTA racism at the highest level,” Garrison said in 2001. “That kind of thing still happens to blacks in the USTA across the board. It bit MaliVai Washington, Lori McNeil, [former pro] Katrina Adams, and every other black player. We were often pushed back from getting into an event, receiving an award, or just being properly recognized when it was obvious that recognition was deserved.”<sup>94</sup>

McNeil, the daughter of former National Football League player Charlie McNeil, also faced racial indignities. “I would play at some exclusive club and somebody white would look at me and tell me to go get them something, as if I was there to wait on them,” she said. “I would have to tell them I was there to play tennis. That would happen to the black players then [in the 1980s]. People didn’t see your racquet, they just saw your color.”<sup>95</sup>

What African Americans saw in McNeil and Garrison were two highly motivated and spirited competitors who, while not blessed with the athletic gifts of the Williams sisters, served as positive role models. Garrison reached the 1990 Wimbledon final, losing to the venerable Martina Navratilova, and was ranked a career-best No. 4. McNeil, who beat world No. 1 Steffi Graf at Wimbledon en route to a semifinal showing in 1994, was ranked as high as No. 9.<sup>96</sup>

Not bad at all for a couple of girls from inner-city Houston whose coach taught himself the game while serving in the Army. McNeil and Garrison at least had a public tennis program to join. Not enough African American youngsters have that opportunity, or access to good coaching, or the financial wherewithal to pay for lessons, equipment, and travel.

William Washington notes that some families spend up to \$20,000 each summer on tennis instruction and tournament fees for their children. Asked what the USTA should do differently to bridge the economic divide, Washington said, “The only black people who are going to get through in this sport are family projects. My sons and daughters, family projects; the Williams girls, family projects; John Wilkerson with Zina and Lori in Houston, that was like a family project; Chanda Rubin [a former world Top 10 player from Louisiana], a family project. If these jokers at the USTA had any sense, they would pay every family coach in this country a grant to coach their own kids.



The USTA commits nothing to family tennis projects for coaching, lodging, per diem, travel, equipment. Yet only black family units have produced quality pro players in America. We have to do it all ourselves."<sup>97</sup>

But Rodney Harmon, an African American former pro who is director of men's tennis for the USTA, considers Washington's argument flawed. There is no way, Harmon said, to know which tennis families, however dedicated, are going to produce a world-class player. The USTA cannot give money to all parents who want to coach their own children.<sup>98</sup>

Generally, the USTA is content to sit back and let tennis parents fend for themselves, offering occasional help in the form of grant money to travel to a tournament if the young player has already shown considerable promise. In 2007, however, the USTA opened its first national tennis academy modeled after those in European countries, with dormitories and full-time coaches.<sup>99</sup>

Time will tell whether this approach will produce more American champions. There have been very few lately. In 2007 Serena's triumph at the Australian Open and Venus's championship at Wimbledon were the only Grand Slam titles won by Americans in singles. No other American player competed in a final. In 2006 no American, male or female, competed in a Grand Slam singles final, something that had not happened since 1937, when blacks were segregated from major tennis events.<sup>100</sup>

A teenager for whom American tennis officials have high hopes is Donald Young, a Chicago-born southpaw who relocated with his parents to Atlanta. Born July 23, 1989, Young is both a family project and the product of the Nick Bolletieri Academy in Bradenton, Florida, where he often trains. Although Young has quick hands, a deft touch at the net, and superb tennis instincts, it is too early to know if he will be The Next Big Thing in American tennis or a plum plucked too soon.<sup>101</sup>

Donald dominated the competition in twelve-and-under, fourteen-and-under, and sixteen-and-under junior tournaments. Tennis people knew of him before 2005, the year he won the Australian Open juniors and the U.S. National Hardcourts in Michigan and became the top-ranked junior in the world. International Management Group signed him in 2004 at age fifteen. Had IMG not done so, another major management agency would surely have. When Donald won the U.S. Hardcourts again in 2006, he had a better junior-tennis résumé than any major American pro star of the past two decades, a list that includes Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, and Michael Chang. But winning the U.S. Hardcourts twice does not guarantee success in professional tennis. Chang is the only player in the last twenty years to win the U.S. Hardcourts and then enjoy a stellar pro career.

Young is the only son of Donald Sr. and Ilona and the protégé of Indian-born Suhel Malhotra, a respected coach in Chicago. Many question their decision to have him compete against men so soon—he went 0–10 before winning his first pro match and was 2–13 after the 2008 Australian Open.<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, Team Young insists that it knows best. “He’s always been playing a level above [his age], and this is no different,” Donald Young Sr., said. “I don’t think there’s anyone out there that wouldn’t take these opportunities if they were offered.”<sup>103</sup>

Handsome, caramel-skinned and still growing at 5 feet, 11½ inches and 160 pounds, Young has endorsements deals with Nike and Head racquets.<sup>104</sup> And he has his own publicist. What he did not have after the 2008 Australian Open, where he lost in the first round, was a significant win in an ATP tournament. But he left Australia ranked in the Top 100 for the first time (No. 97).

African American tennis fans hope the best of Young is still to come, but they also hope they have not already seen the best of Venus and Serena. Both had disappointing results at the 2008 Australian Open, losing in straight sets in the quarterfinals to Serbian players who had never won a set against them before—Venus to Ana Ivanovic and Serena to Jelena Jankovic.<sup>105</sup> At the 2007 U.S. Open, world No. 1 Justine Henin eliminated Serena and Venus back-to-back in straight sets en route to a championship. Indeed, Henin defeated Serena in three Grand Slam quarterfinal matches in 2007. The Williams sisters, future Hall of Famers both, have rewritten the women’s tennis record book and raised the bar to a new level of excellence in the sport. But other players have leaped that bar and are beating the sisters at their own speed-and-power game.

Some would argue that because of the sisters’ outside interests—fashion, acting, and cosmetics for Serena; fashion, interior design, and writing for Venus<sup>106</sup>—and their bulging bank accounts, they are simply not as driven to win tournaments or spend hours each day on practice courts preparing for them. Some speculate that the divorce of their parents, coupled with the September 2003 shooting death of sister Yetunde Price, left psychic wounds from which they have not recovered.<sup>107</sup> Others assert that injuries, an unavoidable issue in sports, have exacted a heavy toll from the sisters. Whatever the reason, Venus and Serena are not the dominant forces in tennis that they once were. Is their reign over?

“If they can stay healthy enough to get through a whole season, Venus and Serena can play great tennis again,” Harmon said. “I don’t want to predict No. 1 and No. 2 for them again, but to me their outside interests are not as big a problem as the injuries. I think they’re still hungry.”<sup>108</sup>

Only Venus and Serena know for sure.

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## **“Giants of the Ring”: A Tribute to the African American Athlete in Boxing**

*Brandon E. Martin and Dennis A. Kramer II*

For a sport that has produced some of the most notorious African American athletes, it is difficult to conceptualize the many racial and cultural impediments that existed for African American boxers. Beginning with slaves serving as prizefighters for financial profit and combating through periods of Social Darwinism, African American boxers have faced countless roadblocks impeding their rise to athletic fame and social acceptance. In a sport created by the majority culture, there has been a continual desire to maintain white dominance in the ring.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding, boxing has produced ring legends such as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali, all of whom were influential in eradicating obstructions for future African Americans in the sport.

The life stories of prominent boxers such as Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Mike Tyson are critical in illustrating the many crises African Americans have experienced in boxing and society. Each boxer's profile underscores the racism, discrimination, and host of societal inequities that African American pugilists endured in their quest for greatness. Boxing has long been viewed as a vehicle for upward mobility for the African American community, but recent years have seen a decline in interest, participation, and passion for the sport.<sup>2</sup> The historical interest in the sport of boxing has now taken a back seat to modernized and media-driven sports such as football and basketball, which offer more accessible opportunities to raise personal economic status. Young African Americans do not dream of being the next Muhammad Ali or Joe Louis but rather aspire to play in the National Football League (NFL) or be the next Kobe Bryant. Thus, young African American males have left behind a sport that was once their solitary means of wealth, freedom, and, in some instances, survival.

From the inception of informal boxing for slaves to the gargantuan “pay-days” of recent times, there has been a perpetual battle over injustice perpetrated against African American pugilists. Understanding the historical and societal contexts surrounding the eras of boxing provides insight into the importance of this sport in the development of the African American athletes’ celebrity, fame, and overall place in America. Moreover, the overt racism and messages of inferiority that past African American boxers endured demonstrates a fight for societal parity that extends far beyond the domain of sports. To this end, it is safe to conclude that African American boxers today represent much more than experts of their craft—they are catalysts for narrowing the racial and cultural divide in America.

### PRIZEFIGHTING, SLAVERY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN DOMINANCE

Although some African Americans, namely, Thomas “The Moor” Molineaux and Bill Richmond, were able to use boxing as a means of earning their freedom and establishing boxing careers in the United States and Great Britain, most slaves were not so fortunate. The most frequent context in which African Americans fought in any organized sense was at the behest of their owners on plantations in the American South.<sup>3</sup> Bare-knuckle fighting between slaves emerged as a spectacle for slave owners. For many slave owners, the staging of boxing matches between slaves was as pleasing as watching game cocks fight in a caged barn. Furthermore, the matching of two hot-tempered slaves had great potential for producing worthwhile rewards, both hegemonic and managerial, as well.<sup>4</sup>

Slave owners had several manipulative tactics in engendering animosity, jealousy, and competition between slaves. This was encouraged by providing slaves with alcohol, by making bets on them, and by laying chips on one slave’s head and daring another to tip it off with his hand. If he did so, it would be called an insult and a fight would begin. Within moments, a circle was formed, and the “white gentleman” would direct the pair to lunge at each other like rams.<sup>5</sup> This subhumane activity was frowned upon by renowned African American leader Frederick Douglass, who claimed, “Everything pertaining to rational enjoyment is discouraged among slaves, and only wild, low sports, particularly to semi-civilized people, are promoted.” Another ex-slave, Reverend W. P. Jacobs (born in 1852), recalled the same mode of fighting: “Niggers fought by butting all the time. They would grab each other by the ears and shoulders and just butt.”<sup>6</sup>

Fighting also existed between slaves and whites on the plantation. Though Douglass was not a proponent of fighting, he was involved in one of the most noted slave-versus-white altercations of this period. After much mental and physical abuse at the hands of Edward Covey, Douglass drifted into a rage and used his fists as a means to unleash his unrelenting anger.



After a two-hour brawl with Covey, Douglas meditated on his plight as a slave, reporting, "The fight with Mr. Covey was a turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood."<sup>7</sup> Evidence of similar conflicts between slaves and whites continued after Emancipation.

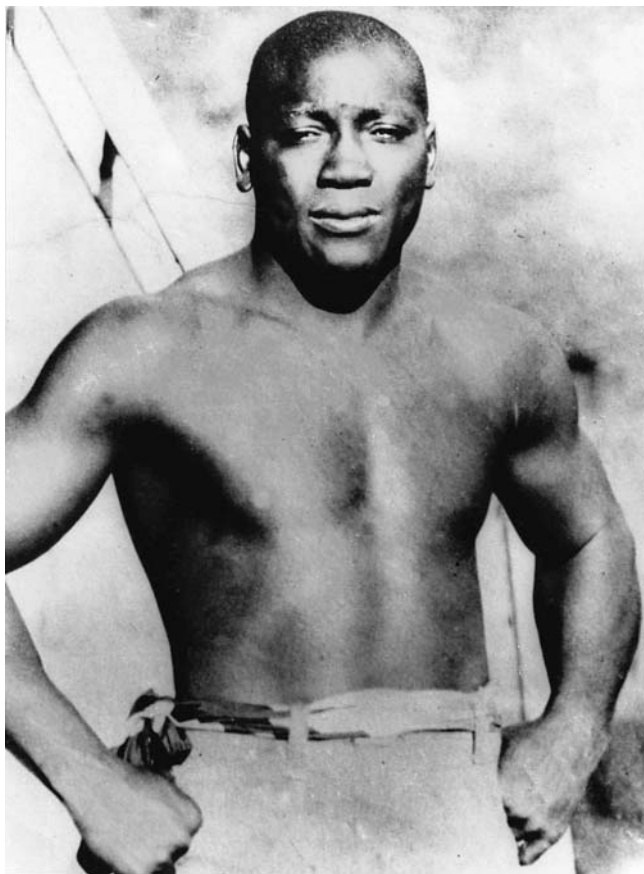
After the Civil War, boxing gained national popularity among African Americans and whites. In the 1880s, there was a significant transition from the London Prize rules, or the "bare-knuckle" style of boxing, to the Marquis of Queensland rules, which essentially required that boxers use fair-sized gloves, eliminate wrestling or hugging, and engage in three-minute rounds. For the first time, interracial competition existed. The results of these contests gradually resulted in much consternation among whites. George "Lil Chocolate" Dixon, the most successful African American prizefighter of the nineteenth century, embarrassed white fighters with his exceptional skill and unmatched speed. Dixon's gallant spirit foreshadowed another famous boxer who would emerge decades later, Jack Johnson. He adored white women, resisted authority, and was not shy about publicizing his boxing talent through media outlets. His most famous victories were against two white fighters, Johnny Murphy and Jack Skelly. Dixon's camp mate was Joe Walcott, "The Barbados Demon," a tenacious fighter who defeated several white fighters in the lightweight and middleweight classes. In 1895, Charles A. Dana, a white sports editor for the New York *Sun*, submitted the following remarks: "There are two Negroes in the ring today who can thrash any white man breathing in their respective classes . . . George Dixon and Joe Walcott. If the Negro is capable of developing such powers in those divisions of boxing, what is going to stop him from making the same progress in the heavier ranks?"<sup>8</sup>

African American boxing success conflicted with the racial power dynamic of this period, which prompted whites to begin constructing theories pertaining to the dominance of African American boxers. They claimed that African Americans as a group had biological advantages over whites. One white sports columnist reported, "For years, it has been recognized that the American negro and his descendants in the West Indies were harder-headed than white men, less sensitive about the face and jaw; most negro boxers can take pain and smashing which would cause the collapse of the white man."<sup>9</sup> Further, white reporters claimed, African American boxers were intellectually inferior and lacked cerebral prowess. As historian Patrick Miller observes, more generous white writers were prepared to concede "Negro physicality as a kind of compensation for the absence of mental qualities." Amid these "scientific" claims, the most obvious trait was that of the racial essentialists rapidly updating their arguments to discount the latest case of African American achievement.<sup>10</sup>

## **JACK JOHNSON: “A MAN BEFORE HIS TIME”**

With all of the overwhelming postulations regarding African Americans and their physical and mental capabilities, there remained one legendary man who gave no credence to such claims—a man who embodied physical prowess, fortitude, and resounding defiance toward white authority. His name was Jack Johnson. Johnson was the world’s first African American heavyweight boxing champion. Considered by many as the pioneer of African American pop culture legends, Johnson’s boxing reign lasted from 1908 to 1915. Known for his flamboyant lifestyle and far from docile

**An undated photo of Jack Johnson, who became the first African American to win the heavyweight boxing title. Johnson was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1954.**



*AP Photo*

approach toward the white establishment of his era, Johnson was deemed a public menace by many. Privately revered by African Americans and despised by white America, Johnson undoubtedly left an indelible print on the sport of boxing and society at large.

Jack Arthur Johnson was born in 1878 in Galveston, Texas. The son of two former slaves, Johnson was raised in a "tight-knit" community of siblings, peers, and devout Methodists. With only five years of formal education, Johnson made an early choice to pursue the sport of boxing. He mastered his calculating style by working in a boxing circus and fighting in private clubs. After turning professional in 1897, Johnson fought Joe Choynski, an accomplished Jewish fighter, in his hometown of Galveston, Texas. With interracial boxing matches banned, the two were arrested for participating in an "illegal contest." Both Johnson and Choynski spent twenty-three days in the local jail. Reports indicate that Choynski began training Johnson when they were released from jail.

About the time that Johnson began his boxing career, other African American pugilists were making their mark in the sport. Joe Walcott, the welterweight champion from 1901 to 1904, Joe Gans, the lightweight champion from 1902 to 1904, and George Dixon, featherweight champion from 1890 to 1897, were the most noteworthy African American boxers of this period. Although African American boxers were able to attain some small successes in the ring, most were subjugated by the ills of alcohol, drugs, crime, and venereal diseases.<sup>11</sup> Johnson was one of the few boxers who was able to rise above the masses and thrive in a period of distraction and despair. Unlike many other African American boxers, Johnson was not satisfied with maintaining the "status quo"—allowing white America to dictate the way in which he navigated the world. He was determined to be the best on his own terms.

Johnson's boxing style was distinctive. With an imposing physique and superior boxing aptitude, Johnson chose a route of efficiency in the ring. Rather than use his physical prowess early in his fights, he would use an arsenal of defensive tactics to confuse and frustrate his opponents. When he sensed that his opponent was both mentally and physically fatigued, he would unload flurries of powerful punches to the body. Johnson's style was inevitably criticized by the white media as cowardly. In contrast, world heavyweight champion "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, who was white, used many of the same techniques a decade earlier and was praised by the press as "the cleverest man in boxing."

One of Johnson's most defining moments as a professional was when he fought Jim Jeffries in 1910. After much consternation regarding Johnson's defeat over Tommy Burns, Jim Jeffries was encouraged to come out of retirement and serve as the "Great White Hope." Because of Johnson's annihilation of Burns, white America became sensitive to the rumblings of

athletic inferiority. Thus, Jeffries represented not merely a contender, but a savior for a populace in desperate need of power and control in the athletic domain. Jeffries claimed, "I am not going to disappoint that portion of the white race that has been looking to me to defend its athletic superiority."<sup>12</sup> Both boxers understood the symbolic significance of the contest and agreed to have the fight in Reno, Nevada, on July 4, 1910. Considered "the greatest battle of the century," this fight sparked the interest of Americans of all creeds, factions, and professions. With over 20,000 people chanting "kill the nigger," Johnson defeated Jeffries in punishing fashion. National race riots accompanied Johnson's victory over Jeffries. Moreover, the federal government in 1912 banned the interstate shipment of fight films, which were then popular movie-theater entertainment. Johnson became a marked man.

However, Johnson was a marked man for far more reasons than his successes in the ring. He enjoyed fast cars and hanging out in popular night clubs and frequently displayed an antisubservient decorum towards white authority.<sup>13</sup> His most overt rebellion was his predilection for white women. Not only was his preference for white women frowned upon, but his violation of the Mann Act presented another controversial issue. The Mann Act of 1910 guarded against prostitution, immorality, and human trafficking, but Johnson became the first person prosecuted under the Mann Act when he encouraged a white woman, Belle Schreiber, to leave a brothel to travel with him to another state. Later, he married a white woman named Etta Duryea, who committed suicide in 1911. Johnson soon remarried and fled the country with his new white wife, Lucille Cameron.

In defiant fashion, Johnson was officially on the run. He traveled to Montreal and then set sail for France in 1912. While in France, Johnson proved to have motivations beyond the ring. He wanted to own a complete library of all books written by Napoleon and to visit operas across France. Johnson was quoted in the French press as saying, "My ambition has always been to live in France, but I am very melancholy in my mind, for I shall never again see the land of my birth."<sup>14</sup> After a successful stint in France, Johnson engaged in stage shows, boxing exhibitions, and even wrestling matches in London and Russia in order to replenish his coffers and fund his extravagant lifestyle.<sup>15</sup> Around 1919, Johnson journeyed to Mexico. He rekindled his love for boxing, but most of his contenders were average fighters at best. Mostly out of boredom, Johnson uncharacteristically became a bullfighter for several years. Wages from boxing and bullfighting allowed him to open a prosperous saloon in Tijuana, but when a new Mexican regime more open to political relations with the United States seized Johnson's saloon, and many of his other ventures in Mexico were eliminated. After seven years in exile, he finally returned home to accept his punishment.

After serving time in Federal prison, Johnson married his third white wife, Irene Pineau, in 1925. During this period, he served as a boxing promoter, preacher, brewery representative, stockbroker, museum lecturer, and nightclub owner.<sup>16</sup> Johnson boxed for the final time at age sixty-seven as part of a fundraising campaign during World War II. His provocative life ended in an automobile accident while speeding on a road in rural North Carolina. Johnson's funeral, held in Chicago, had twenty-five hundred persons in attendance, crowded into a church auditorium.<sup>17</sup>

Boxing historians and sports writers in abundance recognize the true "greatness" of Jack Johnson. Tennis legend and boxing scholar Arthur Ashe claimed, "Johnson was the most significant African American athlete in history."<sup>18</sup> Without a doubt, Johnson's bravado and fundamental convictions forced American society to evaluate itself in terms of its ideals of equality and justice. Moreover, Johnson's actions and boxing success instilled in African Americans a sense of pride, fortitude, and determination to succeed beyond the odds and against despair. To this end, Johnson's spirit and legacy will continue to affect the lives of many throughout the world.

### **JOE LOUIS: "THE BROWN BOMBER"**

Regarded as one of the greatest heavyweight fighters in history, Joe Louis overcame obstacles in his youth, both at home and in the boxing ring. Born on May 13, 1914, in La Fayette, Alabama, Joseph Louis Barrow was the seventh of eight children born to Munroe and Lilly Barlow, both of whom were sharecroppers in what Louis called the "red clay country" of Alabama.<sup>19</sup> Two years after Louis was born, his father was committed to Searcy Hospital for the Negro Insane, located in Mount Vernon, Alabama. Shortly after Joe's father was committed, his family received word that his father had passed away; but, unknown to them, he actually lived an additional twenty years under psychiatric and hospital care. After the "death" of Louis's father, his mother was left to tend to the enormous farmland they owned and to care for her eight children with occasional help from Louis's uncle Peter. Louis recalled his desire to make his mother smile during the early years when he stated, "I always wanted to make my mom smile . . . most of the time I'd scrub all the floors in the house."<sup>20</sup> By 1920, Louis's mother had married a sharecropper, Patrick Brooks, a widowed father of another eight children, and the family had moved to four different farms. Brooks eventually moved his family up north as part of the black migration north to work for Henry Ford. At the age of twelve, Joe Louis and his entire family were settled into the heart of the black ghetto of Detroit, where Louis's boxing passion began.

Louis, with his towering presence over his peers, nevertheless found himself struggling academically and was relegated to a vocational education.

Jim Braddock slumps to the canvas and extends his glove for an easy fall in the championship bout with Joe Louis in 1937.



*AP Photo*

He found solace at the Brewer Recreation Center in Detroit, where he perfected his boxing skills and talents. Afraid that his mother would not support his passion for boxing, Louis took as his boxing name simply Joe Louis, dropping his last name. But his fears that his mother would not support him were unfounded; rather, she served as the largest support system for his development in boxing. After a subsequent debate with his stepfather, Louis decided to withdraw from school and focus his attention on pursuing a professional boxing career. In late 1932, Louis participated his first amateur fight against Johnny Miller, who knocked Louis down seven times in the first two rounds. Louis quickly improved his boxing skills and had an impressive amateur career that culminated in the 1934 National AAU light heavyweight championship. His amateur success propelled him into the professional ranks later that same year.

After dominating the amateur ranks, Louis drew interest from boxing and community leaders, particularly civic activist John Roxborough. Roxborough agreed to manage Louis as he began his professional career

and even convinced Louis's parents that a move to Chicago with Roxborough would be best for Louis's boxing career. Louis's parents soon agreed, and Louis moved into the Roxborough home in Chicago and began to train for his first professional fight.

Louis's first professional fight came on July 4, 1934, against Chicago native John Kracken. The fight lasted less than two minutes; Louis handed a left hook to Kracken that knocked him out. Four days later, on July 11, Louis fought Willie Davis and knocked him out in three rounds, earning a check of \$62.00. Louis won his next twenty-five fights, twenty-one of them by knockouts. In those twenty-five fights, Louis defeated two former heavyweight champions and two of the top contenders for the title. At the end of 1935, *Ring Magazine* awarded Louis its boxer of the year award with a gold belt. Encouraged by his impressive early professional record, Louis scheduled a fight with German underdog Max Schmeling. Schmeling dominated the fight by exploiting the one weakness Louis had—lowering his right hand. By the twelfth round, Louis found himself defeated with his first professional loss by knockout. Louis later recalled the end of the fight, saying, "He must have hit me with about fifty right hands that round. I barely remember being carried back to my dressing room."<sup>21</sup> The fight proved to be meaningful in Louis's development as a boxer.

Despite losing to Schmeling, Louis was given the opportunity to fight for the world heavyweight championship. The Schmeling camp took the Louis nomination to court, eventually losing and clearing the way for Louis to challenge James Braddock, known as the "Cinderella Man." Louis was only the second African American to have a chance to fight for the heavyweight championship in the history of boxing. Not since 1909 and Jack Johnson had an African American male been poised to win the most coveted prize in professional sports. On June 22, 1937, the much-anticipated fight between Joe Louis and James "Jimmy" Braddock took place. After being knocked down in the first round, Louis quickly controlled the fight until the eighth round when he knocked Braddock out, winning the heavyweight championship for the first time.

After winning his heavyweight title, Louis defended his title in eighteen straight fights until he began to serve in the U.S. Army in 1942. Through these title defenses, Louis fought memorable opponents such as Max Schmeling (1938), light heavyweight champion John Lewis (1939), and Billy Conn (1941). The match between Conn and Louis is known as one of the greatest fights in the history of boxing and was the fight in which Louis coined the phrase, "He can run, but he can't hide."<sup>22</sup> After this match with Conn, Louis began to serve his country during World War II.

From 1942 to 1945, Louis became a prominent figure in the U.S. Army. Along with his friend and colleague, Sugar Ray Robinson, Louis fought exhibition fights at local military bases as a form of entertainment for the

troops. Louis even made it over to Europe to fight in a series of fights for the troops in the World War II conquest, donating all his winnings and prize money to the war effort. Louis eventually became the spokesperson for the U.S. Army, but his participation in the Army would prove to be financially difficult when a new tax structure demanded much of his future earnings.

During his time in the Army, Louis became good friends with Robinson. Both Robinson and Louis stood to lose not only their titles but also large sums of money as they continued to fight while serving in the Army. Asked once by a reporter about his title defense during his service in the Army and his promise to donate any winnings to the war effort, Louis responded with, "Ain't fighting for nothing. I am fighting for my county."<sup>23</sup> Louis's efforts in the war gained him the respect not only of the boxing community, but also of the American public at large.

After serving his country, Louis returned to the boxing ring in 1946 and continued to defend his title. However, his participation in the war and exhibition fights had taken their toll, and Louis never returned to the ring with the same vigor he had in 1942. In total, Louis was the world heavyweight champion for eleven years and ten months while defeating twenty-five opponents, twenty-two of them by knockout. With the newfound fame and the respect garnered by his service in the Army, Louis's popularity grew to unmatched heights. Knowing that his best years were behind him, on March 1, 1949, Louis announced his retirement from professional boxing.

In the wake of Louis's retirement, the *Chicago Defender*, a black press, remembered the affect Louis had on changing the culture of young African American males when it stated, "No one will ever know how much Joe Louis really meant to Negro youth in America . . . He was a living symbol of greatness which was achieved in the right way and his actions in ring made him a model of American fairplay."<sup>24</sup> At his retirement, Louis was credited with being one of the most influential African American figures; he retired as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

After announcing his retirement, Louis continued to fight exhibition matches. However, financial struggles and tax problems brought Louis back to the boxing ring to fight Ezzard Charles on September 27, 1950 in New York City. When asked why he decided to return to boxing, Louis responded, "The reason, taxes. The government wanted their money and I had to try and get it to them."<sup>25</sup> Louis eventually lost a fifteen-round decision to Charles and never regained the same form he had when he left boxing. After Charles, Louis went on to have a record of eight wins and one loss. His only loss during his comeback came on October 26, 1951, to future heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano. After his knockout loss to Marciano, Louis again announced his retirement and afterward boxed only twelve more exhibition fights in his career. Joe Louis



ended his professional career with a record of sixty-nine wins and three losses—fifty-five by knockout.

Despite having earned over \$300,000 during his comeback year, Louis still could not pay off the nearly \$500,000 he owed in back taxes. In order to make a living after boxing, Louis relied on his popularity and appearance fees, even being the first African American to ever play in a Professional Golf Association (PGA) tournament.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Louis’s health began to deteriorate, and his good friend Frank Sinatra paid for the medical expense he incurred until his death in 1981 at the age of sixty-six. Louis was subsequently buried in Arlington National Cemetery, with full military honors, for his service the United States during World War II. Soon after his death, a monument and arena were named for Joe Louis in his home town of Detroit, Michigan.

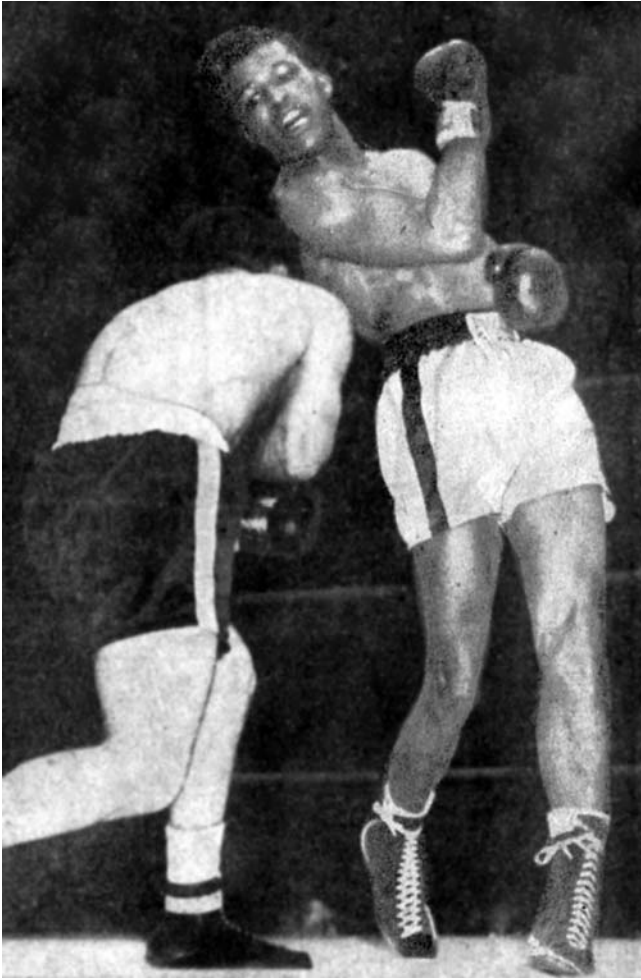
Known as one of the greatest heavyweight champions in the world, Louis was instrumental in creating a culture that accepted African Americans in boxing and praised their successes. Moreover, his service to his country provided insight into how great a human being Joe Louis was. His twenty-seven heavyweight championship fights still stands as a record—but his deeds as a citizen will last forever.

### **RAY ROBINSON: “SWEET AS SUGAR”**

For years, sportswriters have used the “pound-for-pound” ranking system to measure fighters coming from various weight classes.<sup>27</sup> Unknown to most, this was first created to describe the power of boxing legend “Sugar” Ray Robinson. Robinson was feared by his opponents, respected by his peers, and loved for his lavish and public life. However, the fame and fortune brought by his boxing glory were of humble beginnings. He was born on May 3, 1921, as Walker Smith Jr., in Black Bottom Detroit, Michigan (although some contend that he was born in Ailey, Georgia). Robinson was the youngest of three children, had two sisters, Marie and Evelyn, and was born to Leila and Walker Sr. His father worked construction and sewer to support his family, something of which Robinson often spoke: “The only day I really saw him was Sunday . . . I always wanted to see him more.”<sup>28</sup> In his early childhood, Sugar Ray spent most of his time at the Detroit recreation center boxing arena, where he admired the skills of a young amateur boxer by the name of Joseph Louis Barrow—later known as Joe Louis. Robinson’s innate interest in the sport of boxing came at an early age and would continue throughout his entire development.

Robinson and his family moved to New York in an attempt to escape the Great Depression, but, despite their attempt to escape destitution, the Depression brought financial hardship to Robinson and his family. His mother worked as a seamstress and worked multiple jobs to “make ends

Sugar Ray Robinson (right) spins on his toes after throwing a right at champion Jack LaMotta in 1951.



*AP Photo*

meet.” But she somehow managed to provide Robinson and his sister Evelyn weekly dance lessons for a short time—a skill Robinson said was crucial to his success in the boxing ring.<sup>29</sup> As a youth, Robinson was delinquent and became involved with a violent New York City gang. Robinson later decided to withdraw from school in the ninth grade and pursue his true passion of boxing. At fourteen, Robinson attempted to fight in his first amateur contest. Unable to gain an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) card, Robinson

borrowed his friend Ray Robinson's card and thus began to be known as Ray Robinson in the boxing world; winning his first fight on a unanimous decision. Recalling the first fight, Robinson stated, "I couldn't believe it . . . This fight had been easy, that's all I knew about it."<sup>30</sup> The nickname "Sugar" stemmed from his future manager George Gainford, who called Robinson's style in his early fights "sweet as sugar." Robinson had a successful amateur career ending with a record of eighty-five wins and zero losses—sixty-nine wins by knockout. In addition to his perfect amateur record, Robinson was crowned the featherweight champion in 1939 and the lightweight champion in 1940.

After winning the lightweight championship in 1940, Robinson decided to try his boxing skills in the professional ring. He proved his professional boxing skills in New York's Madison Square Garden on October 14, 1940 against Joe Echevarria. Robinson fought a total of five professional fights in 1940, winning them all—and four of them by knockout. In his trademark blue and white, Robinson defeated three champions, including Fritze Zivic, in front of over 20,000 people at Madison Square Garden—one of the largest crowds to date at the time. By the time 1942 had ended, Robinson had boxed his way to a professional record of a 40–0 record, even outboxing opponents who outweighed him by ten or more pounds. He was named the "fighter of the year" that same year. It wasn't until his February 5, 1943, fight with Jack LaMotta in Detroit, Michigan, that Robinson suffered his first defeat. After this defeat, Robinson and LaMotta fought four additional times, and Robinson won each contest. Robinson finished the 1943 year with a career professional record of forty-five wins and one loss.

On February 27, 1943, Robinson went through yet another name change—back to Walker Smith Jr.—when he was inducted into the U.S. Army. In recalling his first experience in the Army, Robinson said, "All this discipline was new to me. I had never really had any regular discipline quite like this."<sup>31</sup> The discipline proved to be difficult for Robinson as he routinely found himself at odds with his military commanding officers. Robinson, accompanied by Joe Louis, performed exhibition boxing matches at different military bases along with coaching the U.S. Army's boxing team. Robinson recalled one event in particular when he refused to fight because of the racial segregation at Keesler Field in Mississippi. Black soldiers were not permitted to interact with white soldiers, and Robinson refused to fight until all soldiers were able to attend. By the end of the boxing tour in 1944, Louis and Robinson had entertained over 600,000 troops at over ninety military bases. A March 29, 1944, slip down a flight of stairs resulted in a mild case of amnesia for Robinson. As a result of his medical condition he was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army on June 3, 1944, unable to accompany his friend Joe Louis overseas to entertain the troops in Europe.

While in the Army, Robinson married his second wife, Edna Mae, on May 29, 1944. His lavish tastes and need to support his new wife soon made Robinson “flat broke” after his discharge from the Army. With no money in hand, Robinson turned to the Mafia-controlled boxing championship to support himself.

By 1946, Robison had fought his way to an impressive professional record of seventy-three wins, one loss, and one draw, but he was not previously given the opportunity to fight for the welterweight championship because he refused to work with the Mafia. On December 20, 1946, Robinson was finally given his chance to fight for the title after his need for money induced him to collaborate with the boxing Mafia. In that bout he defeated Tommy Bell in a fifteen-round decision in the fight known as the “war.” By the end of 1950, Robinson successfully defeated opponents in nineteen nontitle fights and retained the welterweight championship belt by defining his title in four different contests. Also in the 1950, Robinson decided to move from the welterweight to middleweight boxing class. Robinson publicly attributed this move as a result of his inability to maintain the 147-pound weight required to fight welterweight, but it proved to be an increase in monetary compensation.

As a welterweight, Robinson won the Pennsylvania middleweight championship and defeated three of the biggest names in boxing: Robert Villemain, Carl Olson, and Jose Basora. Robinson knocked out Basora in fifty seconds, the fastest knockout victory for over thirty-five years afterward. On Valentine’s Day, 1951, Robinson became the undisputed world middleweight champion by knocking out long-time rival Jack LaMotta in what would be known as *The St. Valentine’s Day Massacre*. Soon after his fight with LaMotta, Robinson set off on a European tour, traveling with an enormous entourage and his pink Cadillac. Robinson briefly lost his title defense in a fight against Randy Turpin, but three months later he regained the title again. Robinson eventually ended the 1951 year again as boxing’s fighter of the year. By the end of 1952, after suffering his only knockout defeat at the hands of heavyweight champion Joey Maxim, Robinson retired and decided to pursue a career in boxing promotion and dancing.

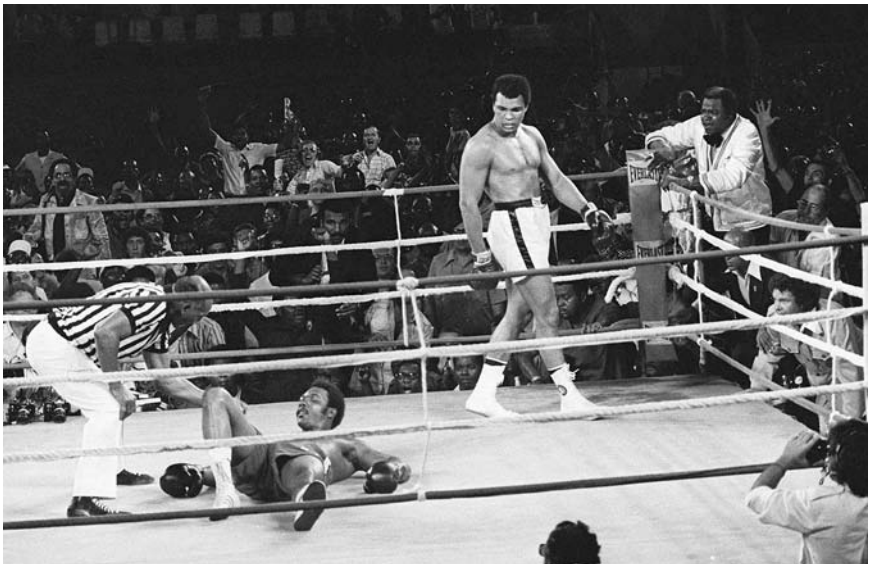
After a frustrating nonboxing professional career, Robinson decided to return to the ring in 1955, winning five out of six fights. His victory against Bobo Olson allowed him to reclaim the middleweight title for a third time in his career. From 1956 to 1959, Robinson had a record of five wins and two losses, each loss during a title fight—eventually costing Robinson the middleweight championship. From 1960 until his final retirement in 1965, Robinson had a record of thirty-three wins, thirteen losses, and three draws and never regained the welterweight or middleweight titles. On November 11, 1965, Robinson retired from professional boxing with a professional record of 175 wins, 19 losses, and 6 draws—110 of those wins by knockout.

The boxing résumé Robinson composed was in all ways remarkable. Through boxing he collected over \$4 million in earnings, all of which he spent by the end of 1965. He spent the remainder of his life with his third wife, Millie Wiggins Brice, whom he married in 1965. He was eventually diagnosed with diabetes and Alzheimer’s disease and passed away on April 12, 1989, at the age of sixty-seven, in Los Angeles, California. In 1997, *The Ring* magazine ranked Robinson as the greatest fighter “pound-for-pound” ever to live, and ESPN did same when it ranked the “50 Greatest Boxers of All Time” in 2007. His boxing résumé, flamboyant lifestyle, and the larger-than-life persona made Sugar Ray Robinson one of the first true African American celebrities and pioneers of boxing.

### **MUHAMMAD ALI: “THE PEOPLE’S CHAMPION”**

Few athletes in history have had the cultural impact or enjoyed the athletic fame of Muhammad Ali. Ali arguably defined a turbulent epoch in American history—a time of civil rights, the assassination of a beloved president, the influence of the Vietnam War, urban riots, the growing trend of women’s rights, and Watergate. While engendering an ineradicable place in boxing history, Ali was indeed a catalyst for political and social change in a radical period of American history.

**Referee Zack Clayton counts out George Foreman in round eight of this title bout with Muhammad Ali in 1974.**



*AP Photo*

Cassius Marcellus Clay was born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky. His father, Cassius Clay Sr., was a billboard and sign painter, and his mother, Odessa Grady Clay, was a homemaker. Although Cassius Clay later changed his name to Muhammad Ali, his name was of great significance and pride for his family. Cassius Clay was the name of an abolitionist, a nineteenth-century Kentucky farmer who inherited forty slaves and a plantation called White Hall in the town of Madison County, Kentucky.<sup>32</sup> He was one of the first men to free slaves in the state of Kentucky. Clay's great grandfather was raised on the property of the abolitionist. In the later part of his professional career, Ali emphatically stated, "My great grandfather was with the old man, but not in a slave capacity, no sir!"

At the age of twelve, Clay met Joe Martin, a part-time boxing trainer in local Louisville. Ironically, Clay met Martin after his bicycle was stolen at the Columbia Auditorium. Young Clay, furious, demanded that the police find the culprit that confiscated his sixty-dollar red-and-white Schwinn. Moreover, Clay claimed that he would beat the hell out of the person who had his prized possession. Martin, the police officer on the scene, was impressed by Clay's fortitude and encouraged him to visit his boxing gym. After six grueling weeks of learning the rudiments of boxing, Clay had his first fight against Ronnie O'Keefe. After three one-minute rounds of boxing, both boys were exhausted and on the verge of dehydration. Clay was announced the winner by split decision. Clay greeted the announcement by shouting to all that he would soon be "the greatest of all time."<sup>33</sup>

As Clay developed as a boxer, he mastered an unorthodox style previously unseen in a man of his stature. Much like Sugar Ray Robinson, Clay carried his hands low, snaked out his left jab, and circled the ring on his toes. His greatest defense was his quickness, his uncanny ability to gauge an opponent's punch and lean just far enough away from it to avoid getting hit—and then strike back.<sup>34</sup> To augment his unique ring skills, Clay was one of the hardest-working athletes in Louisville. As a teenager, Clay referred to his body as a temple and created regimented meal schedules and training times. For breakfast he favored his own nutritional concoction: a quart of milk and two raw eggs. He also believed soda pop to be as lethal as cigarettes to his body. Clay ran seven miles to the gym and back home each day. He was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. He considered the gym his sanctuary and had the unwavering discipline of a true champion.

Clay continued to train like a professional in his mid-teens and compiled an impressive amateur record: one hundred wins, eight losses, two national Golden Gloves championship wins, and two national Amateur Athletic Union titles.<sup>35</sup> As an amateur boxer, Clay idolized Sugar Ray Robinson for his superior boxing skills and his popularity outside the ring. He even

dreamed of having the same assortment of Cadillacs as Robinson had: lavender, "money" green, and pink. One of Clay's most memorable moments was when he had the opportunity to meet Robinson in the summer of 1960. Clay was underwhelmed by the "air of inferiority" that Robinson passed on to him and his boxing peers—a look of boredom, disinterest, and aloofness. At that moment, Clay said to himself, "If I ever get great and famous and people want my autograph enough to wait all day to see me, I'm sure going to treat them different."

After winning the light heavyweight gold medal in the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Clay moved to Miami to begin training for his professional debut. It was around this time that Clay revealed his secret interest in the Nation of Islam, a black Muslim sect spearheaded by the controversial Elijah Muhammad. Clay, being naturally disciplined and more impetuous than most, found the sect's foundational tenets of hierarchy, manhood, and self-pride appealing. Shortly after Clay began training in Miami, he was approached by Jeremiah Shabazz, the Nation of Islam's regional minister, based in Atlanta. Shabazz began to mentor Clay and gave him exhaustive lessons on slavery, urban economics, leadership, and the most cherished principle of the Nation of Islam—"Do for self." These crafted lessons by Shabazz resonated with Clay and began to affect the way in which he navigated the world. Clay's vision, passion, and devotion for the Nation of Islam was further nurtured by Malcolm X. Ironically, the Nation of Islam's leader, Elijah Muhammad, was ambivalent about Clay's interest in his group. Muhammad regarded boxing as no better than drinking, a worthwhile indulgence performed for the merriment of white men.<sup>36</sup> With Clay's rising success and popularity throughout the 1960s, Muhammad made an exception for this future national icon.

From 1960 to 1963, Clay amassed a 19–0 record, with fifteen knockouts, defeating boxers such as Tony Esperti, Jim Robinson, Donnie Fleeman, and Lamar Clark. He was later victorious over more accomplished fighters such as Alejandro Lavarante, Sonny Banks, and Archie Moore. He finally emerged as the top contender for Sonny Liston's heavyweight title. Clay was not naïve about Liston's physical gifts. An ex-convict with a tough, rugged exterior, Liston was one of the most powerful sluggers in the heavyweight class. Clay knew that he needed a psychological advantage to win the contest. He tormented Liston before the fight with excessive verbal assaults, calling him a "big ugly bear" and a "fat chump." Clay shocked the world by defeating Liston in seven rounds. His height advantage and blazing speed on his feet proved to be too much for Liston to handle. Liston asked for a rematch, and the two fought again in Lewiston, Maine, in 1965. Clay won by knockout in the first round of what came to be called the "phantom punch." Liston later announced that he was forced to take a dive in the fight because of threats from the Nation of Islam. This claim by Liston

seemed credible in light of speculations about the Nation of Islam's involvement in organized crime in black neighborhoods across the nation.

After defeating Liston, Clay announced his conversion to the Nation of Islam. He abandoned his slave name of Cassius Marcellus Clay and accepted the name given to him by Elijah Muhammad—Muhammad Ali (one who is worthy of praise). It was around this same time that Ali refused to serve in the United States Army during the Vietnam War. After being criticized profusely for his anti-patriotism stance, he maintained, "I'm not trying to dodge the war. We are not supposed to take part in no wars unless declared by Allah or The Messenger. I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong . . . They never called me a nigger."<sup>37</sup> After defending his title nine times, Ali was suspended from boxing and stripped of his title in 1967. Smokin' Joe Frazier became champion in Ali's absence from the ring.

Ali was allowed to fight again in 1970 and on March 8, 1971, challenged Joe Frazier for the heavyweight title. This historic fight was known as the "Fight of the Century" and was one of the most anticipated sporting events of all time. Ali suffered his first professional defeat against Frazier in a fifteen-round brawl that saw both fighters hospitalized after the match. Ali lost again in 1973 to another formidable opponent, Ken Norton, a former marine with above-average skills in the ring. Ali's propensity for womanizing grew during this period; it was speculated that he slept with two women the night of the Norton fight.<sup>38</sup> Ali later had a rematch with both Norton and Frazier, winning two close and physically demanding battles. In pursuit of his heavyweight title, Ali prepared to fight George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, in 1974.

At age thirty-two, Ali silenced his critics by defeating George Foreman in a fight entitled "The Rumble in the Jungle." Ali used a technique he called the "Rope-a-Dope," where he leaned against the ropes and permitted Foreman to punch him until he became severely fatigued. This strategy worked to perfection as Ali frustrated the younger Foreman for eight rounds. Ali later used his "Rope-a-Dope" technique in later fights when he was too lazy to train, thus allowing himself to take more punishment in the ring.<sup>39</sup> Ali's fight against Foreman was the subject of a 1996 Academy Award-winning documentary, *When We Were Kings*.

Ali's boxing career began to decline after his fight against Foreman. He fought Frazier for the third time in a fight labeled by Don King the "Thrilla in Manila." Both Ali and Frazier suffered extreme trauma in this grueling fight. Ali won the match when Frazier could not come out from his corner in the fifteenth round. Later, an uninspired, out-of-shape Ali fought Leon Spinks and lost his title for the third time in his career. In 1980, he fought Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick and unceremoniously lost both bouts. After Ali's fight with Berbick, Ali retired, recording a remarkable fifty-seven wins, thirty-seven knockouts, and five losses in his career.<sup>40</sup> He was elected to the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1987.



The unparalleled legacy of Ali, who was diagnosed with pugilistic Parkinson's syndrome in 1984, continues to flourish. In 1996, he had the honor of lighting the flame at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. The following year, he was the recipient of the esteemed Arthur Ashe Courage Award. On November 19, 2005, the sixty-million-dollar non-profit Muhammad Ali Center opened in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to displaying his boxing memorabilia, the center focuses on themes of peace, social responsibility, respect, and personal growth. Most recently, on June 5, 2007, Ali received an honorary doctorate of humanities at Princeton University's 260th graduation ceremony.<sup>41</sup> Ali currently lives with his fourth wife, Yolanda 'Lonnie' Ali, in Scottsdale, Arizona.<sup>42</sup>

### **MIKE TYSON: "THE BADDEST MAN ON THE PLANET"**

Arguably the most publicized and celebrated African American athlete during the 1990s, Mike Tyson was known by many as the "baddest man on the planet." Tyson's relentless style and unprincipled behavior made him a fan favorite and the subject of much media scrutiny. Even though his talent in the ring was unparalleled by many fighters in his generation, Tyson will be remembered most for his excessive idiosyncrasies, frequent conflicts with women, and countless issues with the law.

Michael Gerard Tyson has born on June 30, 1966, to Lorna Smith Tyson and Jimmy Kirkpatrick in the infamous Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York. Tyson's childhood was marked by tough times and poverty that eventually led to his father's departure when Tyson was just two years old. His abandonment left the family in disarray, in which Lorna Tyson moved her family around from apartment to apartment for the next seven years.<sup>43</sup> Brownsville, New York, a crime-infested ghetto, proved less than conducive to Tyson's adolescent development. By the time he turned thirteen, Tyson had been arrested thirty-eight times for various acts of violence, including purse-snatching and bullying.<sup>44</sup> He constantly got into fights with schoolmates who made fun of his high-pitched voice and social awkwardness. The constant fighting and bullying eventually led to his expulsion in junior high.

After his expulsion, Tyson was sent to Tryon School for Boys, where his true passion for fighting and boxing would be facilitated. A juvenile counselor, Bobby Steward, recognized Tyson's natural ability and physical makeup for boxing and introduced Tyson to legendary trainer Cus D'Amato, who eventually removed Tyson from Tryon School to focus solely on his training and amateur career. Teddy Atlas, who eventually took over the sole responsibility for training and managing Tyson, aided D'Amato in his training of Tyson. The close relationship between D'Amato and Tyson eventually evolved into a guardianship in which D'Amato and his family were the principle caretakers of young Tyson.

After training with Atlas and D'Amato, Tyson entered his first amateur fight at thirteen in a small gym in the Bronx. During this fight, Tyson knocked out his opponent, four years his senior, in the third round, taking the boxing world by storm. He quickly entered in the Junior Olympic training program at the age of fifteen and began to emerge as the top candidate for the 1984 Olympic Team. In 1984, Tyson won the National Golden Gloves Heavyweight Championship and amassed a 24–3 record during his amateur career. However, Tyson's chances of making the 1984 Olympic team vanished when he lost twice to challenger Henry Tillman. Tillman eventually went on to win the gold medal at the Olympic Games and left Tyson devastated that he was unable to compete.

Shortly after the disappointment of not making the Olympic team, Tyson decided to turn professional. On March 6, 1985 in Albany, New York, Tyson made his professional debut against Hector Mercedes. Tyson dominated the fight, knocking out Mercedes in the first round. Tyson won his next twenty-two fights, nineteen of them by knockout (and fourteen of those in the first round). After dominating his first professional year, Tyson experienced his first setback as a professional fighter when his trainer Cus D'Amato died in November. The loss of D'Amato was especially emotional for Tyson; D'Amato had served as his father figure for most of his teen years. Shortly after D'Amato's death, Tyson fought in his first televised fight against Jesse Ferguson on February 16, 1986. Tyson was victorious over Ferguson, breaking his nose in the fifth round. The fight was eventually stopped in the sixth round and ruled a disqualification on Ferguson's end. In fear of breaking his knockout streak, Tyson and his corner appealed the ruling and the decision was changed from win by disqualification to a win by technical knockout (TKO).

Tyson's victory against Ferguson gave him the opportunity to fight for the World Boxing Council's (WBC) heavyweight championship. Tyson fought then-champion Trevor Berbick on November 22, 1986. The fight lasted only two rounds as Tyson won by TKO and claimed the WBC heavyweight championship. Tyson, at the age of twenty years and four months, became the youngest heavyweight champion ever.

With his newfound confidence, Tyson decided in 1987 to go on a world-wide tour aimed at fighting all the top heavyweights. His world tour started in March with a defense of his WBC title against James Smith. In a fight that went the distance, Tyson defeated Smith by unanimous decision. Five months later, Tyson took on Tony Tucker in a twelve-round fight that again ended as a unanimous decision in favor of Tyson. In this victory, Tyson took Tucker's International Boxing Federation (IBF) heavyweight title—the first time in heavyweight history that a fighter had held all three heavyweight titles at the same time. Tyson ended the 1987 year with a fight against 1984 super heavyweight Olympic gold medalist Tyrell Biggs, a fight he won easily.

After a tremendously successful 1987, 1988 was filled with turbulence, both within the ring and in his personal life. Nevertheless, Tyson started 1988 with a fourth-round knockout in a January fight against boxing legend Larry Holmes. Tyson followed up his victory over Holmes with a two-round knockout of Tony Tubbs in Japan and a ninety-one-second knockout of the previously undefeated Michael Spinks.

Building on his accomplishments in the ring, Tyson improved his personal life when he married popular actress Robin Givens. Despite being labeled a "power couple," the marriage was a disaster from the beginning. Allegations of mental insanity, domestic abuse, and violence plagued their marriage and were eventually aired on live television in an interview with Barbara Walters when Robin Givens called life with Tyson "torture, pure hell, worse than anything I could possibly imagine."<sup>45</sup> The marriage eventually ended on February 14, 1989, when Givens filed for divorce from Tyson.

The personal distress Tyson felt spilled over into his boxing career. During the tough times of marriage, Tyson fired his long-time training staff and slowly began to decline in the ring. Even though he beat both opponents in 1989, Tyson's dominance of the sport had declined and his weakness in technique became visible to his opponents. Struggling through both his fights in 1989, Tyson's decline in the sport came to an apex on February 11, 1990, when Tyson lost to heavy underdog James "Buster" Douglas. The loss was Tyson's first by knockout and is seen as one of the biggest upsets in the history of boxing. The loss also meant that Tyson was no longer the undisputed heavyweight champion.

After his defeat at the hands of Douglas, Tyson worked his way back into contention for the heavyweight title, which was currently held by Evander Holyfield. Tyson beat then number-two contender Donovan Ruddock twice—both times controversially—to set up the much-anticipated match between Tyson and Holyfield. However, the fight did not occur; instead, Tyson was arrested on rape charges in July 1991. On February 10, 1992, Tyson was found guilty and sentenced to six years in prison for the rape of Miss Black Rhode Island, Desiree Washington, while in Indianapolis, Indiana. Despite allegations of inadequate legal representation, Tyson spent three years in jail and was released in March 1995. The combination of his incarceration and his public marital problems damaged Tyson's appeal in the boxing community but fueled general public interest.

After his time in jail, Tyson successfully competed in two comeback fights in 1995 against Peter McNeely and Bust Mathis, Jr. In the first fight, Tyson knocked out McNeely eighty-nine seconds into the first round. Even though Tyson spent time in jail and had garnered a bad-boy image, the world tuned in to watch this fight, which was viewed by over 1.5 million households. Despite the brevity of the contest, the fight grossed over \$96 million, including \$63 million in pay-per-view fees.<sup>46</sup> Building on his

comeback fights, Tyson reclaimed both the WBC and WBA heavyweight titles by defeating Frank Bruno and Bruce Seldon, respectively.

November 9, 1996 marked the culmination of the most anticipated Holyfield–Tyson fight in Las Vegas, Nevada. Despite being a heavy favorite, Tyson was defeated by Holyfield in the eleventh round by TKO. Holyfield became the first to win the heavyweight title for a third time in his career. Individuals in the Tyson camp claimed that the fight was unfairly fought by Holyfield and demanded a rematch. On June 28, 1997, Tyson received his rematch that was viewed by almost two million households and grossed over \$100 million in revenue, a record at the time.<sup>47</sup> The fight became one of the most notorious and controversial fights in history when it was stopped in the third round after Tyson removed a chunk of Holyfield's right ear by biting it during the fight. Tyson was disqualified from the fight and eventually fined \$3 million and had his boxing license revoked by the Nevada State Athletic Commission in 1997.<sup>48</sup>

After his year-long ban from boxing expired, Tyson was reinstated and returned to ring to fight François Brotha. Tyson showed he was regaining form when he won with a decisive knockout in the fifth round. Despite a return to top form, Tyson could not outrun his legal troubles. A month after his fight with Brotha, Tyson was sentenced to a year in jail and probation for assaulting motorists in 1998. After being released nine months later, Tyson fought in five different contests between 1999 and 2002, three of which he won; the other two were declared no contests. Tyson's reentry into the top contenders slot set up a title fight with undisputed heavyweight champion and former friend, Lennox Lewis. In another record-setting fight, grossing over \$106 million, Lewis knocked out Tyson in the eighth round.<sup>49</sup>

Despite grossing over \$300 million dollars in boxing earnings, Tyson filed for bankruptcy in August of 2003.<sup>50</sup> Over the course of his career, Tyson squandered his money on a lavish lifestyle and was betrayed by members of his own entourage. After fighting and losing two fights he entered in order to earn money, Tyson announced on June 11, 2005, that he did not have "the fighting guts or the heart anymore" and officially retired. Tyson completed his boxing career with a record of fifty wins and six losses—forty-four of those wins by way of knockout. Known as one of the most widely feared fighters in boxing's history, Tyson was ranked as the second-best heavyweight fighter by *The Ring* magazine in 2000 and 2001.

After retiring from boxing, Tyson remained in the media spotlight because of his numerous encounters with the law. In December 2006, Tyson was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence (DUI) and felony drug possession.<sup>51</sup> He was eventually sentenced to twenty-four hours in jail and three years' probation in 2007. Tyson also competed in exhibition fights to pay off his numerous financial debts.

From his troubled beginning in Brooklyn, Tyson became one of the most notorious and publicly scrutinized boxer in history. Tyson's powerful style and quick punches allowed him to make history as one of the greatest fighters in the ring. Although he dominated in the ring, Tyson's inability to cohabitate in society created obstacles and fueled his inevitable downfall. His career accomplishments were constantly overshadowed by controversy. Ultimately, Mike Tyson will be known as boxing's most infamous and troubled champion.

## CONCLUSION

Eldridge Cleaver, a political activist and leader within the Black Panther party, asserted that "the boxing ring is the ultimate focus of masculinity in America, the two-fisted testing ground of manhood, and the heavyweight champion, as a symbol, is the real Mr. America."<sup>52</sup> In that sense, all of the aforementioned boxers proved to be a force beyond the parameters of the ring. They created pathways for social change and self-pride and debunked many of the existing stereotypes of their respective eras. Arguably, these special athletes left an indelible print on the morale of black America—healing wounds of despondence, racial inferiority, and low societal expectations.

Although all of the profiled boxers exemplified greatness in their respective periods, none are actively in position to perpetuate the legacy of African American fighters. Some contend that Floyd Mayweather Jr., currently the number-one pound-for-pound boxer in the world, could be the answer. Mayweather has won six world boxing championships in five different weight classes. Though Floyd's boxing mastery is evident, he has yet to have the social impact of his predecessors. Although his lurid stunts in the media remain entertaining and impressive to many, Floyd has not used his popularity to attack societal injustices or to uplift the underserved in any way. Thus, categorizing Floyd with the noted boxing "giants" in this chapter is premature at best.

Boxing has changed dramatically since the early days of pioneers Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux. Boxing for African Americans has served as a vehicle for pervading the layers of racism, social mobility, and oppression. Without question, boxing has aided in the quest for respect of African Americans nationwide. America will forever be indebted to the effect that African American boxers have had on its culture and way of life.

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# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POPULAR CULTURE**

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# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND POPULAR CULTURE**

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**Edited by Todd Boyd**

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# Introduction

## AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

The argument can be made that it is in the broad area of popular culture that African Americans have had their greatest and most profound effects on American society. This is most certainly the case from the beginning of the twentieth century on. My intention is not to discount the role of the social and the political in contextualizing the African American experience, but to point out the overwhelming influence that popular culture has had in shaping the image of African Americans internally and in the larger society.

The relationship between African Americans and various forms of popular culture—such as music, sports, film, and television—is both complicated and congratulatory. Relative to this relationship is the way in which, over time, certain issues have evolved while other issues—such as the need for African Americans to control the means of cultural production, and the continued prevalence of certain stereotypes—in spite of the particular form of culture in question. Interestingly enough, these various forms of popular culture have often been written about and discussed exclusively of one another. I have long been a proponent of discussing these forms of culture as part and parcel of a larger body of work defined collectively as African American popular culture rather than limiting the influence of one form exclusively to its own domain. It makes sense that what is happening at a given time in film, for instance, may be influenced by what is taking place in the world of music. On the other hand, each medium requires that specific attention be paid to it in order to determine what is going on internally within that specific field of inquiry.

It is important to point out that in discussing popular culture, I am concerned with the culture consumed by “the people,” as it were. Some may find the exclusion of literature from these volumes to be an omission, but it is the point of view of this project that much has been written about literature but little penned about African American representation in less well-regarded genres such as comic books that nonetheless deserve our attention. In some ways, my distinctions are motivated by class concerns that have often tended to exclude the “popular” in popular culture when

celebrating those works that have animated discussions about African American identity over the years. This is not to dismiss the impact of a Langston Hughes or Toni Morrison as much as it is to recognize the fact that those watching a boxing match or a Blaxploitation film could indeed be excluded from discussions that might overlook such endeavors because of their overtly popular nature. It is this populist appeal that underscores the aim and scope of articles selected for this series of volumes.

For many years, African Americans were simply objects within popular culture whose representation tended to be quite stereotypical and especially problematic. At a certain point though, African Americans attempted to harness the means of production and create their own representations instead of being represented by others. This is the point at which things began to get interesting. For example, it is the utterly hideous and overtly racist representation of African Americans in a monumental film like D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) that creates the space for the beginning of an independent Black film movement, a movement that began with people such as Emmett J. Scott, Oscar Micheaux, and George and Nobel P. Johnson and continued up to such a prolific and contemporary mainstream figure as Spike Lee.

The tragedy and the triumph of African American imagery in popular culture is a situation where the two seemingly opposite poles are often interwoven. A good example of this can be found in the reasoning surrounding baseball player Jackie Robinson's integration of Major League Baseball in 1947—the point here being that there would have been no need for Robinson to break the “color line” in baseball had there not been a policy of racial segregation instituted in the first place. As this example indicates, African Americans in popular culture have often found themselves operating somewhere between the reality of racism and the possibilities of redemption through cultural engagement.

To this end, the core of African American cultural expression has often been located in music, which is itself an extension of the oral tradition that has long defined the Black presence in American society. A discussion of American music is a discussion that must recognize the centrality of African American music in this context. To exclude African American music from this discussion ultimately means that no discussion can take place.

The various forms of Black music—from gospel and the blues to jazz, soul, and, more recently, hip hop—have helped define the culture over time and have also provided a running soundtrack to American life. Black music, in the forms of blues and rhythm and blues, was the original source for what would eventually become “rock ‘n’ roll,” a popular but derivative genre of music that went on to reach mainstream mass appeal—often at the expense of its Black roots. The everlasting influence of music has been represented over time in phrases like “the Jazz Age,” the role of bebop in

defining the “Beat Generation,” the place of both gospel music and Motown in the Civil Rights movement, and the transformation of American culture brought by hip hop in contemporary society, among many other examples. The joys and pain, the triumphs and tribulations—all have been expressed both in and by the music. A list of social, political, and economic issues have been uniquely represented by the various sounds that emerge from the oral tradition. The music has served to inspire, inform, soothe, and enrage all those who might choose to listen, as well as all those preferring to ignore what was going on but unable to get away from the prevalence of the particular music in question. The role of Black radio at various points in history has helped to spread this music while also serving as an important nexus between the culture and the community in the process. Black music is a life force as well as a source of history, and the influence of this music has been felt throughout the culture.

If music represents the heart and soul of Black popular culture, sports represents the body itself. The success and struggles of African Americans in sports helps provide a physical example of the long, arduous journey that Black people have traveled over time in America. From once being excluded from certain sporting activities to now being the standard by which others measure their success, Black athletes have served a vital role in pushing the social and political boundaries that have often limited Black advancement in society.

The success of such a great boxer as Joe Louis and such a great sprinter as Jesse Owens helped solidify America’s image and position in the world during the lead-up to World War II. Yet neither of these figures was afforded the treatment of a first-class citizen after their athletic success was no longer needed for the country’s uplift. The aforementioned Jackie Robinson was successful at integrating baseball well before the public schools were desegregated and before the Civil Rights movement had gained national attention. Some might even call this “Act One” of what would become the Civil Rights movement, helping to bring attention to the push for social justice on a national stage in an otherwise unjust society.

There is perhaps no better example of the shift in attitude about Black athletes in America than the saga of Muhammad Ali. The gentleman originally known as Cassius Clay was one of the most hated Americans in the turbulent 1960s because of his membership in the controversial Nation of Islam, and especially because of his refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam War. Ali was stripped of his title, his passport was taken, and his ability to make a living was seriously denied based on such actions. Over time, however, Ali prevailed in the courts and in the ring as well. Eventually his triumphant story caused a new generation to begin reconsidering his legacy in the 1990s—so much so that he is often considered one of America’s greatest heroes and most influential icons in the present. Yet, for many

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African Americans, Ali was always a hero who stood up for what he believed, who spoke his mind, and who used his status as a prominent athlete to push for social change.

Since the heyday of Ali in the 1960s and 1970s, Black athletes have transcended new heights, becoming successful corporate sponsors and cultural icons of the highest order. This transition is best exemplified by Michael Jordan, whose incredible skill set and success as a basketball player was his passport to an unprecedented reign as a global sports and cultural icon in the 1980s and 1990s. In his time, Jordan was embraced across the racial spectrum, but there were also many African Americans who felt that Jordan should have used his position to further political issues as Ali had done before him. But Jordan was of a different era and generation from Ali. His across-the-board appeal and monumental success set new standards for Black athletes and the role of athletics in the larger society. Figures like Jordan help make sports an integral area of popular culture, their images moving freely through so many different areas within the culture itself.

In contemporary society, some African Americans entrepreneurs now occupy places in the sports world other than just participating as athletes—for example, figures like Robert Johnson, founder of the BET network and the owner of the NBA's Charlotte Bobcats. Johnson's success demonstrates the link between entertainment and sports, thus fully foregrounding the importance of popular culture as a vehicle, as well as the upward mobility of African Americans now having a hand in the ownership of teams, as opposed to simply being players. The presence of a prominent figure from the hip-hop world, such as mogul Jay-Z, who owns portions of the New Jersey Nets, is but another example of the link between various spheres of popular culture and the existence of those who now have enough resources to be capital investors as well. Many African Americans have also moved into the executive suites of various teams and assume the roles of managers and coaches as well. Though there is still a lot of room to grow in terms of full Black participation in all levels of the sporting world, progress has been made since the racially problematic days of Owens, Louis, and Robinson.

In the worlds of film and television, African Americans have fared somewhat less well than their counterparts in music and sports, although the presence of African Americans in these venues has been something of note throughout the history of both. The visibility and influence of media has meant a constant struggle over issues of representation as it pertains to African Americans. In addition to the above-mentioned Micheaux and his fledgling efforts as an independent filmmaker, other African Americans such as Spencer Williams and, later, Melvin Van Peebles used the screen as a way of representing their own version of Black life in America. Van Peebles and his provocative work *Sweet Sweetsweetback's Baadasssss Song*

(1971) took the notion of independent cinema to uncharted territory with a stunning political critique that spoke to the sentiment of many people invested in the ideology of Black nationalism. The film represented a moment when culture and politics tended to work hand in hand. Hollywood took its cue from Van Peebles's critical and financial success and began what came to be known as the Blaxploitation movement, which defined Black presence in the 1970s. For the first time, cinema assumed a unique position among other aspects of Black culture in which visual representation came to be debated for its central role in defining African Americans relative to the larger society.

In 1986 filmmaker Spike Lee released his debut feature *She's Gotta Have It* and in so doing revived the Black independent film movement. Lee, with his shrewd marketing skills, tapped into the emerging sentiment of hip-hop culture and went on to redefine what it meant to be a Black filmmaker, managing to get his films made by the mainstream Hollywood studio system and maintain his own unique style at the same time. After Lee's success, several other young Black filmmakers—Robert Townsend, Reginald and Warrington Hudlin, John Singleton, and Allen and Albert Hughes, among others—began making their own way into Hollywood, turning the late 1980s and early 1990s into an extremely fertile period for African American images on film.

In addition to African American filmmakers attempting to control the means of production, the overall image of African Americans in Hollywood has long been an issue. Demeaning stereotypes often accompanied actors such as Stepin Fetchit and Hattie McDaniel in the 1930s; an actor such as Sidney Poitier enjoyed groundbreaking success in the 1960s, in more recent times, Denzel Washington's critically acclaimed performances have garnered Oscars, and the financial clout of Will Smith has made a mark on box-office proceeds. The historical evolution of the African American image in Hollywood is a journey filled with peaks and valleys, often defined by promises of inclusion set against a tradition of exclusion.

To the extent that African Americans in film have been defined by a conflicted history, something similar can be said about the role that African Americans have played on television. African Americans on film and in television have functioned differently from those in sports or music. Issues of representation, especially pertaining to stereotypes, for instance, continue to animate discussions about both film and television; yet the desire for dramas about African Americans on television has been the consistent cry as well. Many regard television's focus on Black situation comedies limiting and especially problematic. Though African Americans have long used stand-up comedy as an effective forum for the dissection of racial politics, the limitations inherent to confining Black television representation primarily to the genre of the situation comedy remains in question. Here the

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focus is on genre. Comedies have often tended to feature Black performers in roles that are taken less than seriously, thus the desire to see a broader palette for African American images remains a demand put forth by the offended party.

For African Americans on television, Bill Cosby tends to function in a manner similar to Sidney Poitier on film. Bill Cosby made a name for himself as the first African American in a starring role on television with *I Spy* in the 1960s, his animated cartoon *Fat Albert* in the 1970s, and his mega-hit *The Cosby Show*, which dominated 1980s network television, revived the sitcom, and became in the process one of the most important television programs ever. Since that time though, much discussion has taken place about what was not being represented on television—rather than what was.

The 1970s also featured several prominent African American sitcoms, including *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. *The Flip Wilson Show*, an hour-long variety show, revolved around the many personas of comic Flip Wilson. The ground breaking miniseries *Roots* was another landmark television event during this decade. Based on the best-selling book by Alex Haley, *Roots* unfolded over seven nights in 1977 and traced the history of Haley's family from its African roots to its enslavement in America and the resulting aftermath. This popular narrative exposed many Americans to the horrors of slavery for the first time and also sparked an interest in genealogy as people from all races became interested in tracing their own roots. In the 1960s, television played a vital role in broadcasting the pivotal moments of the Civil Rights movement, and the 1970s inaugurated a fertile period for Black representation on television. Since that time, some might say that little has changed in these representations, even though the landscape of television has broadened substantially since then.

The proliferation of cable ushered in the era of Black Entertainment Television (BET), a network originally owned by Robert Johnson. This all-Black cable channel, long controversial for its heavy emphasis on hip-hop music videos, infomercials, and religious programming, was the result of Johnson's strategy of maximizing profit, though many of his critics felt that the network should be a venue for education, filling in the blanks left by the exclusion of African American representation on other networks. More recently, the cable network TV1 debuted in 2004, part of the media empire of Cathy Hughes, a prominent and successful African American woman who also owns the radio conglomerate Radio One.

One of the most significant figures in the history of television has been Oprah Winfrey. As an African American woman, Winfrey developed a massive following from the mid-1980s forward based on her extremely popular television program; from this, she has branched out into other areas of the culture—film, magazines, theater—creating a pervasive brand name that has few peers throughout the larger history of American popular culture.



Winfrey's popularity has been so broad-based that she decided to use her weighty mass appeal to endorse and campaign for Illinois senator Barack Obama in his historic quest for the presidency in 2008.

To the extent that popular culture is produced and consumed, its ability to reach the hearts and minds of common people is illuminating. To trace the history of African Americans through the twentieth century is to observe the drama, comedy, politics, and soul of Black cultural expression. When focusing on several different modes of representation, from early silent film to theater and from the Delta blues to hip-hop and beyond the breadth and depth of the Black experience is evident in all its attendant celebration and controversy. The contents of these volumes cut across medium, genre, and style to be both focused and eclectic. It is in the accumulation of these individual parts as a whole that we may begin to recognize the many common themes that animate this uniquely American set of circumstances, located deep within the African American existence.

*Dr. Todd Boyd*  
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Los Angeles, CA

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# Black Radio Stations and the Community

*Carmen L. Manning-Miller*

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC: UNIVERSAL APPEAL**

Black radio in the United States is born from the African American experience. African Americans are the primary target audience members for these stations. Since the early days of radio, African Americans have set important trends in America's popular culture, because, clearly, the black listening audience has not been the only audience for black radio stations. Black radio is recognized as influencing the career of Elvis Presley, introducing white listeners to rhythm and blues, and fueling the rock 'n' roll culture. Issues of race and community still make the role of black radio in popular culture distinctive and crucial.

Soul, rhythm and blues, gospel/inspirational, jazz, rap, and hip-hop are always fair game as descriptors of black radio formats. For some African Americans, in spite of computer technology, black radio is their only link to some forms of black culture.

American popular culture has been enhanced by the genius of African American musical traditions because African Americans, in a peculiar context, have been involved in the development of popular music. Selective expropriation of African American culture has existed since slavery. American popular culture is periodically infused with the latest in African American music, dance, and comedy, although these cultural transactions are sometimes misguided and condescending. Historically, African American song, dance, and humor were vulnerable to commercial exploitation. White entrepreneurs and entertainers routinely appropriated black cultural innovations and tailored them to appeal to a white audience. In return, African Americans were forced to compromise their artistry in

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order to gain entrance into a white-controlled and racially segregated entertainment industry. By the 1920s, radio broadcasting played a decisive role in determining the form and context of African Americans cultural and economic development and political participation in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

With the invention and subsequent mass production of the phonograph in the 1920s, blues, jazz, and gospel were made more accessible, to black people in particular. The formation of the race record industry enabled blues and jazz to surface as national phenomena. The recordings were called “race records” because they were produced by and for African Americans. The records were played on the radio and youth—not only black but increasingly white—liked the sounds. Within these parameters, the race record business served as an important catalyst in helping blues and jazz become a part of the mainstream of popular American culture.<sup>2</sup>

The period before the end of World War II was the era of big bands, fancy ballrooms, and live music for radio. By and large, live music on radio meant live music performed by white musicians. (As a rule, black musicians were barred from radio performances.) Exceptions, however, included the likes of Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club, Chuck Hubb, Count Basie, and others. These broadcasts weren’t aimed at African American audiences. Broadcasters and advertisers were simply meeting white Americans’ demand for big band music.

As the swing era declined, rhythm and blues became popular in African American communities. With the added boost of increased affluence after World War II, African Americans were able to spend more money on recorded music. In 1952, Dolphin’s, a Hollywood record shop and black retail outlet, reported that its business suddenly consisted of almost as many white customers as blacks. The growth was attributed to deejays playing rhythm and blues records. As the market for African American popular music expanded, so did the number of stations playing it.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson notes that in the early 1940s less than 25 percent of stations in the United States were independent, unaffiliated with the ABC, NBC, CBS, or Mutual Radio Networks. To attract an audience, independent stations specialized in types of programming not offered by the networks. Until the 1940s, independent radio stations and networks included African Americans only in selected radio programs because of advertisers’ fears of alienating white audiences by associating their products with too much programming for black people. Popular shows were *Amos ’n’ Andy* and *The All-Negro Hour*. Celebrities such as Paul Robeson, Nat King Cole, and Ella Fitzgerald were featured performers. However, at the end of World War II

the purchasing power of African Americans had caught the eyes of some struggling white entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup>

## BLACK RADIO: COMMERCIAL APPEAL AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

One of the first radio stations in the United States to develop programming by blacks for blacks with white ownership was WDIA of Memphis, Tennessee. In the early 1950s, the station's ratings skyrocketed. WDIA was rated first in the Memphis radio market and had one of the highest ratings of any independent station in the nation. A. C. Williams, a pioneer WDIA disc jockey, said, "Before we were six months old, stations from all over were sending representatives who stayed two or three days observing us." WDIA was one of many stations eventually switching formats from white to black programming.<sup>5</sup>

After the launching of WDIA, other black radio stations broke ground and provided similar community services: WOKJ in Jackson, Mississippi, KOKY in Little Rock, Arkansas, and WENN in Bessemer, Alabama. In the 1950s, Michigan dentist Haley Bell became the first African American to build black radio stations (WHCB-AM and WCHD-FM) from the ground up. Big stations such as WERD in Atlanta, WDAS in Philadelphia, WEDR in Miami, and WLOU in Louisville, Kentucky, had black radio formats by the mid-1960s.<sup>6</sup>

WDIA listeners recalled the core of the community programming broadcast. Shirley Cosby remembers participating in *Quizzen on the Air*, a quiz show developed by the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and WDIA to feature students from the area's black schools.<sup>7</sup> Another listener, Dorothy Saulsberry, a Memphis educator said, "The station's worthwhile activities in the black community were almost beyond numbering. Cultural activities, philanthropy, youth work, help to the poor, whatever the black community in Memphis and the area needed, WDIA was there to help."<sup>8</sup> The station set up a goodwill fund to buy school buses to transport crippled black children and to make college scholarships available. It established boys' clubs, provided 125 little league teams, and collected funds for low-cost supplemental housing.

The voice of African American disc jockeys was central to black radio's community involvement and economic growth. Barlow contends that with soul music enshrined as the programming choice for black radio stations, the role of the disc jockey became influential. They were a potent force not only on the airways but in the music industry and in their hometowns. In the 1960s, disc jockeys at black radio stations pioneered radio's most creative formats, introduced their audiences to new, socially conscious soul music, championed civil rights causes, and retained the power to make or break the hits in their respective markets.<sup>9</sup>

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Deejays at black radio stations nurtured the grapevine on which civil rights information circulated in the black community: "They marched on picket lines, spoke at protest rallies, helped raise money for the civil rights case, and served as officers in local civil rights organizations. These activities kept them closely attuned to the grassroots struggle, which was reflected in what they said and played on the air."<sup>10</sup>

In 1964, KOKY–Little Rock station manager Eddie Phelan explicitly told disc jockeys not to comment on social issues at the station. Still, the station found itself in the forefront of a campaign for justice in the *Curtis Brown Ingram* case. Brown was a black prisoner clubbed to death by a white trustee at the Pulaski County Penal Farm. Deejay Bob Broadwater managed to find two witnesses who testified that the trustee had acted on the orders from one of the guards without provocation from Ingram.<sup>11</sup>

In 1968, WDIA's Chris Turner openly flaunted his membership in a Memphis black power organization called the Black Knights. Turner, hugely popular in the local community, held a minute of radio silence to protest Mayor Henry Loeb's handling of sanitation workers. The strike eventually drew Martin Luther King Jr. to the city and his death was the subject of extensive coverage and comment by Turner and other WDIA announcers. The station seemed to have been important in sustaining community support of the strike.<sup>12</sup>

Jack Gibson, a noted Atlanta disc jockey, was among those who insisted that "if it were not for black radio . . . more cities in the United States would have been burnt to the ground after the death of Martin Luther King." The deluge of commendations and awards received by black radio stations—among them D.C. outlets WOL and WUST and Memphis station WDIA—from law enforcement agencies and civic leaders in recognition of their contribution in restoring order suggests that these stations had played a significant role in preventing a terrible situation from worsening.<sup>13</sup>

Black politicians also heralded black radio in reaching black voters during this era of civil rights history. In Texas, Barbara Jordan noted the value of radio in the 1966 campaign that saw her become the first African American, and first woman, elected to the state's senate. Contrasting her success in that election with two successful earlier bids for election to the Texas House of Representatives, she set much store by her decision to ignore television and concentrate on black-oriented radio: "When we got it broken down into districts, we did not put any funds into television, and only into radio for the two Negro stations that we had."<sup>14</sup>

New York City's WLIB-AM Radio once dubbed itself "the Nation's Top Black Super Station—Your Total Black News and Information Station." The station was cited as a center of communication, a place for dialogue, and a source of news and information. Walker found that the station played a key role in the 1989 election campaign of the city's first African

American mayor, David Dinkins, and that most black elected officials in the New York community viewed WLIB as part of their community outreach strategy.<sup>15</sup>

Martin Luther King surmised in 1967 that black people “were totally dependent on radio as their means of relating to society at large. They do not read newspapers. . . . Television speaks not to their needs but to upper-middle-class America.” King said the community had come to appreciate the role that the radio announcer played in the lives of African Americans. In praise of deejays, he contended that “for better or for worse, you are opinion leaders in the community. And it is important that you remain aware of the power which is potential in your vocation.”<sup>16</sup>

By the mid-1960s there were only a handful of black-owned radio stations, yet black radio stations were willing to cooperate with the activities of the civil rights movement. Ward provided several reasons for this utility. By 1964 attitudes had changed within the industry toward covering the Southern freedom struggle. Ward noted that the civil rights campaign was perceived as a viable movement allowing deejays, reporters, radio owners, and managers to test the limits of what was acceptable in terms of civil rights advocacy and movement news coverage. Also radio stations were compelled to cover civil rights as it became the major domestic news story of the times because stations were saddled with Fairness Doctrine policies mandating the community coverage.<sup>17</sup> Even white owners who had no reputation of supporting civil rights causes realized that “[black radio] has to be involved in the struggle for integration. You cannot operate a station and not be involved.”<sup>18</sup>

One of the most outstanding examples of how radio was positioned to promote community interests was the long campaign against discriminatory practices in the state of Mississippi. The outcomes served to have a profound national implication for efforts to increase African American involvement in radio and other media. In 1964, the United Church of Christ (UCC) led the opposition to the renewal of broadcasting licenses at WJDX and WLBT in Jackson, Mississippi. Complaints were also made against other Jackson facilities—radio stations WSLI and WRBC, and WJTV, a CBS television affiliate owned by *Jackson Clarion Ledger and Daily News*—as well as against the WCBI radio and television franchise in Columbus, Mississippi. Headquartered in New York, the UCC was a two-million strong union of congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. In March 1964, the UCC monitored a week of radio and television broadcasts in Mississippi. Disturbed by the complete absence of African American voices or viewpoints on these media outlets serving an area with a 45 percent African American population, the UCC had petitioned the FCC on behalf of various groups who wanted to testify in the next round of station license renewal applications.

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The UCC petition raised critical questions about the extent to which local people could exercise a measure of control over the radio and television facilities that purported to serve them. This initiative and a slew of other civil rights and media litigation efforts were dedicated to increasing the number of black owners of radio and television stations, to improving the quantity and quality of service broadcasting devoted to black audiences, and to ensuring proper African American representation at the FCC.<sup>19</sup>

### BLACK OWNERSHIP

Some scholars claim that two assumptions underwrote the clamor for more black radio ownership. The first was that black owners would hire more black staff at their stations, especially in executive positions. The second was that black ownership and executives would be conspicuously engaged in community activism and politics—and that they would find a balance between news, politics, community affairs, and public service broadcasting and the soul music that dominated black radio stations.<sup>20</sup>

By 1964, only 5 of the 5,500 commercial radio stations operating in the United States were owned by African Americans. By 1968, when advertising revenue of the 528 commercial stations featuring regular programming for black audiences brought in \$35 million dollars per annum, there were still just eight black-owned stations. By 1970, there were sixteen, ten of which were in the South. Between 1969 and 1989, loans from government-sponsored programs helped fund the purchase of 90 percent of all new black-owned outlets. The number of black-owned facilities had increased nearly twelvefold. In 1978 the FCC introduced for the first time measures designed specifically to increase the level of minority media ownership in America. But these efforts yielded ambiguous results. The new ownership statistics represented less than 2 percent of the total number of radio stations operating in the United States by 1980. Then, too, definitions of what constituted minority-owned stations were in constant flux and were revised in 1982 so that owners selling to companies with as little as 20 percent minority participation could appeal for special tax breaks. African Americans seldom managed to buy the bigger, more lucrative and prestigious metropolitan stations. (Cathy Hughes, owner of the most black radio stations, is a notable exception.<sup>21</sup>)

Black radio ownership seemed to have reached a plateau by 2000. The 274 black-owned stations operating in 1995 had dwindled to 200. Within a decade the deregulation of the airwaves and the lapse of federal assistance to black ownership initiatives in the form of distress sale provisions, tax incentives, and restrictions on the number of stations a single owner could have in any market, eroded significant economic gains for African American radio



station owners. The legislation also eliminated the requirements that stations include public service programming in their formats.

Scholars fault the 1996 Telecommunications Act for the decline in black radio ownership. Hutchinson posited that rising operating costs, racial discrimination by advertisers, media consolidation, and changes in listener demographics made black stations ripe for the pickings of corporate entities. Hutchinson found that the corporate syndicates appreciated the lucrative nature of the stations and bought them on the cheap.<sup>22</sup>

African American station owners were unable to access capital quickly to make new acquisitions, especially because the 1996 legislation inflated the price of broadcast ownership beyond the reach of most African American owners. Optimistically, owners of the largest black-owned radio companies, such as Cathy Hughes, CEO of Radio One, are buying struggling stations and investing in African American news and information for radio and television.<sup>23</sup>

## DEFINING FORMATS

Another industry shift affected the prosperity of black radio, the career potential of some African American artists, and the flexibility of black radio programming. The stronghold that deejays possessed in radio programming in the industry waned when the “Top Forty” format became an industry standard. This programming format affected black radio in that what was played was in the control of the station’s management and no longer in control of the deejays. This process decreased deejays’ opportunities to expose local artists. The play list, dictated by *Billboard* rankings, dismissed the notoriety of many black artists.

Radio industry leaders justified the shift by blaming deejays who were involved in payola operations for robbing stations. In the aftermath of the scandals, when Top Forty radio emerged, many black radio stations followed suit in an effort to compete in a new market that attracted advertisers to demographics that included black and white listeners of crossover music. The new format shaved the profits and diluted the cultural identity of the once-profitable soul-station formats in the nation’s biggest media markets.

Top Forty radio eventually led industry leaders in the direction of the urban contemporary concept. Urban contemporary was designed as a multiracial format. In its original conception, black artists in the soul, funk, and jazz categories were integrated on air with tunes by white artists who performed in similar genres. Barlow argues that urban contemporary simply institutionalized a process of “reverse crossover” that had begun earlier. Although the format provided greater access for white musicians and white personalities on what had been black radio stations, black performers or

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black radio personalities did not gain any reciprocal access to rock radio.<sup>24</sup> As the style became a successful crossover ploy for attracting white advertising dollars without alienating black listeners, the format was labeled urban contemporary by the radio industry.

Barrow described a similar cycle of innovation, success, competition, and crossover at Washington D.C.'s WHUR-FM. The station's biggest advance in the era of crossover was a format called "The Quiet Storm," a blend of ballads and jazz instrumentals. Stations all over the nation copied the idea. But the crossover trend raised concerns among afrocentric purists who argued that "at some stations the format only paid lip service to the cultural and social diversity of the African American population."<sup>25</sup>

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the concentration of economic power in the radio industry, competing digital technologies, cookie-cutter music, and radio schedules with negligible news and current affairs broadcasting are the order of the day for most commercial black radio stations. In this milieu, the communal aspects of black radio may be preserved by black public radio, black radio networking, and the evolving technologies of high definition and satellite radio.

### **PUBLIC RADIO, THE AMERICAN URBAN RADIO NETWORK, AND NEW TECHNOLOGY**

Black public radio can be categorized in two groups: educational and community. The educational stations are mostly owned and operated by historically black colleges and universities. The community-owned radio stations are most often owned and operated by nonprofit foundations controlled by local boards of directors. These stations usually program jazz, blues, gospel, Caribbean, Brazilian, and African music, the formats abandoned by most commercial stations in pursuit of high ratings and profits. Historically, black college and university public radio stations have most often been attached to academic budgets and academic programs.

Before the mandate of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and National Public Radio in 1967, which spawned the growth of public radio funding by the federal government, the only black college station on the air was WCSU-FM at Central State University in Ohio. The upsurge began when WSHA-FM at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, went on the air. During the 1970s, at least twenty other stations emerged.<sup>26</sup>

Another category is the student-intensive cable radio outlet. Cable stations do not need an FCC license to operate, and they have a history on black campuses dating back to World War II. The first cable station was started at Hampton University in 1940. Lincoln University in Pennsylvania also operated a cable station during this period.

In the 1980s, the growth spurt of black-controlled public radio at historically black colleges and universities slacked off because of federal govern-

**Tom Joyner speaks at the 2004 Dialogue with America's Families, in which six presidential hopefuls answered questions posed by local residents.**



*AP Photo/Bruce L. Flashnick*

ment cutbacks. Some stations developed alternative operational models to compensate for the lack of funding. Brooklyn, New York's Medgar Evers Community College worked out a time-sharing arrangement on WNYE-FM with its license holder, CUNY Board of Trustees. CUNY continued to broadcast educational programs on WNYE in the day, but evening hours were turned over to a coalition of faculty, students, and community media activists. The news and public affairs programming focused on issues, needs, and concerns affecting central Brooklyn residents.<sup>27</sup>

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Twelve outlets were initially charged with serving the interest of African American communities. Over time these stations have broadened their community bases and services. The most successful community radio station serving an African American community is identified as WPFW-FM, a 50,000-watt outlet launched by the Pacifica Foundation in Washington, D.C. Eventually, WPFW became the largest and most listened-to historically African American community radio station in the country. However, the station fell victim to market factors. After a long stint as a jazz station, WPFW decided to switch to a “world” beat format. Quickly the station’s ratings and funding base plummeted, and the station renewed its original format.<sup>28</sup>

By the early 1980s, KPOO, “Poor People’s Radio in San Francisco,” had broadened its base to include San Francisco’s Hispanic, Asian, Filipino, and Native American populations. Music, news, public affairs, and cultural programs are presented in the languages of each of the station’s targeted ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the station is still marketed as an African American–owned and –operated noncommercial radio station.<sup>29</sup>

Examples also exist in noncommercial radio history of how the most depressed communities, who might benefit from community radio the most, have been penalized by the structural constraints of the model. In 1977, a black nonprofit community organization in rural Warren County, North Carolina, put WVSP on the air. The station began with a paid staff of six and a jazz, blues, local news, and public affairs format. By 1982, the station had expanded its staff and volunteer bases. When funding cuts devastated its operational budget, the station moved to the adjacent Nash County market in search of a more lucrative funding base. The strategy failed and the station went off the air.<sup>30</sup>

In 1991, the historical merger of its two competing black radio network predecessors, National Black Network (NBN) and Sheridan Broadcasting Network (SBN), created American Urban Radio (AURN). AURN became the third-largest and only black radio network in the United States. AURN touts having the largest network reaching urban America, with more than 200 weekly shows and an estimated 25 million listeners. The network broadcasts news, entertainment, sports, and information programming to more than 475 radio stations nationwide. It is the only African American broadcaster with a bureau in the White House, and it has offices and bureaus in New York, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.<sup>31</sup> Another aspect of networking in black radio also endures: the *Tom Joyner Morning Show*. It is the most prominent black radio show in decades to be syndicated nationally by a mainstream media corporation. Joyner’s show has been successful for several reasons: it has amassed a large influential audience among African American baby boomers, has rejuvenated the careers of “old-school” R&B artists, and has paved the way for other black radio ventures by proving that they can be profitable and

competitive in urban markets.<sup>32</sup>

Critics legitimately bemoan the demise of black radio vis-à-vis ownership and programming, but alternatives exist on the digital horizon. Already, the migration of African Diaspora music has survived the transition to digital technology. The concept of “narrowcasting” has renewed the attraction of advertisers to more specifically targeted audiences. Satellite radio so far has offered a variety of afrocentric formats grouped by decade and by genre. African American personalities such as Oprah Winfrey and Jamie Foxx have also launched talk, music, and comedy programming that will attract an African American listening base to satellite radio. Because digital and satellite media technologies are exempt from FCC requirements, the presence of public affairs that meet the specific needs of the African American community is minimal, although present. Similar to the plight of resource-poor noncommercial public radio audiences, the very audiences who benefit from these technologies can ill afford to pay for expensive hardware and monthly subscription fees.

High definition has bolstered the free radio market. HD radio uses a signal that piggybacks on standard frequencies and can be played on digital radio receivers. HD radio allows broadcasters to slice their broadcast streams into several channels, each devoted to a different kind of news or music programming. Listeners’ access to this technology also remains a big concern.

Howard University’s WHUR-FM launched its HD station, WHUR-WORLD, in 2006. It has allowed the station to revisit the all-black music concept the station employed before market pressures—wrought by innovations in programming for urban audiences—altered its format. In addition, the station can be accessed by Internet. WHUR-WORLD has returned to its original “360-Degree Total Blackness” concept. The station’s management claims that because the station is not owned by corporate interests, the programming can cover a broad range of interests throughout the African Diaspora.<sup>33</sup>

AURN has used podcasting as one way to interface its programming digitally. Listeners can download shows to their computers or iPods.<sup>34</sup> Podcasting is one of the Internet’s equalizing technologies, allowing anyone with a PC to become a broadcaster. By lowering the cost of broadcasting to nearly nothing, it enables more voices and messages to be heard.

Black radio is a medium of creation, evolution, and dissemination, and it is a home for many African American listeners. It has been in some ways the only forum for a wide spectrum of issues and concerns of black culture and African American people. Black radio is the most ubiquitous means of mass communication for African Americans. It helped define African American music and consciousness because of its appeal, giving it its economic prowess and its place as both a servant and leader of the African American community. On black radio, African Americans speak a different English language,

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empower politicians and the citizenry, challenge racial supremacy, fuss with and gossip about each other, worship, and reveal their talents to a nation of listeners who embrace the best of what is broadcast. Black radio is a platform for a culture that will continue to claim an important presence in all realms of radio broadcasting, whether over the airwaves or across cyberspace.

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# African American Sacred Music: From Folk Spirituals to Urban Gospel

*Milmon F. Harrison*

The musical legacy of African Americans is arguably their greatest and most enduring contribution to American expressive culture. This essay explores one aspect of that rich musical heritage: African American sacred music. The story of the origins and subsequent development of African American sacred music follows the experience of African Americans from their earliest arrivals in North America as enslaved Africans to the present. It might be thought of as a kind of repository of a people's commentary on the world and their varying positions within it. African Americans translated their particular struggle, and their enduring hope for something better, into the universal language of music.

In order to more fully understand our topic, we must place it within historical contexts that both precede and follow its emergence as a distinct art form in the United States. The goal here is not to provide an exhaustive history of the vast topic of African American sacred music but rather to consider several important moments in its development and its continued influence on American culture beyond the strictly religious community of African Americans. This essay argues that the meanings, uses, and influence of this music extend far beyond the boundaries of the spiritual or religious rites—and that, historically, the relationship between the black Church and the performance of African American sacred music has frequently been marked by a tension that continues today. In other words, although an obvious, close relationship between African Americans' sacred music, faith, and faith-based institutions does indeed exist, African American sacred music is not only church music but occupies a number of important spaces within the broad spectrum of African American culture in particular, as well as American popular culture in general. These linkages will be made clear through illustrative examples in the remainder of this exploratory essay.

## WHAT IS AFRICAN AMERICAN SACRED MUSIC?

African American sacred music—whether as spirituals or gospel—refers to the music-making traditions of black people in a North American, primarily Christian, context from the seventeenth century to the present day. These forms of music gave utterance to the spiritual and theological worldview—the Black Sacred Cosmos<sup>1</sup>—of Americans of African descent. African American sacred music also refers to a body of songs (or hymnody) that has come to be accepted and established as traditional within the African American religious community and by scholars of African American music. Such songs include “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and “Steal Away.” This body of work also includes standard hymns of Protestant Christianity in general that over time have been reinterpreted according to African American sensibilities. The well-known hymn “Amazing Grace” is one example of this practice.

Like other forms of African American music, African American sacred music also carries within it a particular style of singing and musical performance. This style has its origins in traditional West African performance practices adapted by African Americans, and many of the characteristic elements can usually be found in other forms of African American music. Among these elements are the prevalence of polyrhythms and syncopation (referring to the complexity of the rhythmic structure of the music as well as the vocal performance) and a style of singing that is sometimes highly dramatic and expressive of individual faith and conviction (as in gospel performance).

Melismatic singing, the practice of vocal embellishment in which a singer moves through a range of notes on one syllable within a song’s lyric, is another characteristic of African American sacred music performance. The “call and response” modality, in which a lead singer sings or “calls” out a particular line or phrase that is then “answered” by the other singers (or the congregation), is yet another characteristic element adapted by African Americans and can be found in virtually all their music. This emphasis on collectively creating the music through “call and response” is also supported by the simple lyrical structure of the songs and the repetition of certain words and phrases throughout the song.<sup>2</sup>

Like those of jazz and blues that developed alongside it, audiences of black gospel music performance expect a high degree of improvisation, often thought of as making a song a performer’s own. Rather than merely rendering a song the same way twice, musicians’ and singers’ ability to instantaneously improvise, or riff, is highly valued. In terms of overall thematic structure—again like the blues—gospel music’s primary concern is to express aspects of the believer’s experience in this world, rather than to focus primarily on the deliverance to the next world. It articulates a tran-

scendent faith that is “real-ized” in the struggles of everyday life. Finally, given that a distinctive characteristic of twentieth-century gospel music lies in its marriage of blues music to sacred lyrical content, it has followed musical trends found elsewhere in secular musical culture, and continues to do so even today.

In terms of accompaniment, singing a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment) and using the body as instrument in music making (as in hand-clapping, foot-stomping, and dancing) have been an important part of making African American sacred music that originated in the slave community. Where there were instruments to be found or made, and where there were musicians among the community who might play a banjo or violin, for example, such music might have been included as well in the singing of sacred folk songs during slavery and afterward in the small, Southern churches in which these songs continued to be sung.

Black gospel musicians have included a broad range of instruments into their performances beyond, for example, the pipe organ used in more traditional forms of European sacred works. In contrast, gospel musicians use drums, electric guitars, horns, and any other type of available instruments as accompaniments to the voice. Gospel music carries a long tradition of fusing secular musical idioms—such as blues, jazz, R&B, and, in more recent years, hip-hop—with religious imagery and lyrical content.

## **RESISTANCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SACRED FOLK MUSIC**

The music of enslaved Africans contained multiple meanings. These songs expressed hope for deliverance from their experience of enslavement on earth, faith in salvation, and hope that their spirit would be received into heaven upon death, their singular perspective on those who dominated them. These songs played a part in their acts of resistance of their subordinated position as well as made space for them to challenge the negative representations of black people and their culture that enjoyed great currency in the popular imagination of the day.

Enslaved Africans in the United States drew upon their cultural heritage and adapted aspects of it in New World contexts. Because theirs was a life with the central characteristic of long hours of unpaid labor, the work songs and the field hollers were two of the earliest forms of their generalized African cultural background to be adapted. Toiling together in the fields as agricultural workers gave them an opportunity to use the work songs and hollers as a way of not only passing the time but, in certain types of jobs, rhythmically coordinating their efforts when working together on a common task. This rhythmic pattern, or cadence, helped all involved to maintain a steady, common pace in the work. “Call and response” was also an important feature of the work song and field hollers.

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The spirituality of Africans and their American-born descendents also occupied an important position in their worldview. As is common with many indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans came from cultural backgrounds where little distinction was made between the sacred and the secular, or profane, realms of existence. According to this view, everything was subject to the spirit world. Out of their secret gatherings under the “brush arbors” (or “hush harbors,” as they often referred to these places in which vegetation grew in such a way as to muffle the sound of their worship activities) the plantation churches developed.<sup>3</sup> In their churches and other clandestine religious gatherings African Americans could openly worship together. Thus the spirituals, including the mournful sorrow songs, the jubilee songs of joy and celebration, and also the songs that spoke of deliverance, reflected the consciousness of an enslaved but hopeful people.<sup>4</sup>

But the spirituals also served subversive purposes in the midst of systematic racial subordination of blacks. Not only did these songs reaffirm the spirituality and faith of the community—and in so doing, affirmed their humanity and intrinsic worth in the midst of a social and political system that completely denied their humanity—but they were also drawn upon in the service of collective resistance to the social order. In certain contexts, the singing of particular spirituals was understood to contain coded messages that the slaves used to communicate secretly with each other under the ignorant eyes and ears of their masters and overseers. For example, the well-known spiritual “Steal Away” was often used to convey the message that there would either be a secret meeting taking place soon, or that there would be an escape attempt. In this way the duality—the double meanings—contained within African American music represents another characteristic feature for consideration in our attempts to fully understand African American expressive culture more generally. This duality has been an important part of African American survival: appearing to be resigned to their second-class citizenship while at the same time finding creative ways to express inner or secret ways to oppose and resist structured oppression.<sup>5</sup>

The spirituals, or sacred folk songs, of enslaved Africans and their descendants were also subversive in that they were appropriated politically by the abolitionists and advocates for black civil rights in the nineteenth century (as well as in the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement). As part of the abolitionist campaign, written testimony of former, or fugitive, slaves became a literary genre known as (Fugitive) Slave Narratives. These works bore witness to the horrors of life in bondage. Public appearances and speeches by former (often fugitive) slaves such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass also served the abolitionist movement. The folk spirituals of the Southern slave community were also called into service as an

example of the creativity, the expressiveness, and most of all the humanity of enslaved Africans and their free, but still not equal, counterparts. Thus, in addition to their written and spoken testimony, the music of African Americans—particularly their sacred music—served multiple purposes far beyond their particular religious beliefs and practices.

Many historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), most of which are located in the South, were established during Reconstruction, the period immediately following the Civil War lasting from 1865 to 1877. Among the most notable of these institutions of higher education for newly freed black Americans was Fisk University, founded 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee. A few years later, in 1871, as a means of helping save the struggling university from financial collapse, the university's music director George White assembled a small group of students, some of whom were former slaves, into a group that came to be known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Originally the repertoire of the singers was a combination of European choral works and other types of music appropriate for the concert hall. But soon, in response to the overwhelming response of audiences to their renditions of the songs of their slave past, the focus of their concerts came to be primarily spirituals and the jubilee songs of celebration and joy from which their name arose.

The group of singers toured not only the nation but also abroad for more than a decade, some of its original members continuing to sing with newcomers. The original Jubilee Singers of Fisk University are commonly considered the group responsible for once again adapting the culture of enslaved Africans and developing it into an arranged concert format more suitable to white and European musical tastes and aesthetic sensibilities. At this time in American popular culture, the dominant portrayals of black life came through the demeaning caricatures performed by white minstrel show performers in blackface makeup. In that context the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University brought the music of African Americans to an international audience with a dignity and a sense of racial pride uncommon in the representation and popular imagination of African Americans, especially those who had been enslaved. At the same time that they helped challenge prevalent stereotypes of their race, this group of talented young people was able to save their university, helping to make it possible for multitudes of other African Americans to receive a university education in the midst of a still racially restrictive South. Thus the duality of African American expressive culture can once again be appreciated. As did the abolitionists before them, the Jubilee singers called into service the sacred music of African Americans to indirectly subvert the existing order. Their concerts, which increasingly featured folk spirituals sung in complex harmonies, opened a space for new, more dignified representations of African Americans, their culture, and their capabilities. The

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Jubilee singers' use of four-part harmonies in the arrangements of their music became the model of the gospel quartets that would dominate the genre from the 1940s to the 1960s, a period commonly referred to as gospel music's Golden Age.<sup>6</sup>

Continuing in the tradition established by the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, a number of similar groups sprang up in African American colleges and universities within a short time. Today, many college and university campuses across the United States have gospel choirs as permanent performing groups that help audiences to learn about, appreciate, and preserve the creativity and faith expressed in the body of songs created in African Americans' slave past for future generations to enjoy.

### THE GREAT MIGRATION AND THE RISE OF GOSPEL MUSIC

The reality of blacks' lack of power or protection in the "Jim Crow" South, along with the region's economic instability, provided strong pushes for African Americans looking for a new place to call home. Northern industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York became the destination of over 1.5 million African Americans during what is referred to as the Great Migration between the years of 1910 and 1920. African Americans left the South in droves, their imaginations fired by religious images of a promised land of freedom and opportunity.

But for many of these formerly rural and agricultural migrants to urban industrial centers, the North was anything but a promised land. They found that a *de facto* form of segregation also existed there and that blacks were still subjected to unfair treatment and lack of protection by authorities, just as they had been in the South. To make matters worse, some of those African Americans who already were in the North were less than hospitable to their country cousins from the South. One of the settings in which this sense of alienation for migrants *within* the black community was most strongly felt was in the mainline black churches.

It was not uncommon for black churches in Northern cities to be made up of congregants from a higher social class than that of the migrants. The norms of acceptable emotional display in the worship services within these churches revolved around reserve: being much less spontaneous, less ecstatic, and less demonstrative than was the norm in many of the black churches in the rural South. The songs sung by the large Northern church choirs were frequently classical European choral works rather than the sacred folk songs and high-energy services the Southern migrants were accustomed to. As a result, many of these migrants became disaffected and left these established black churches in favor of an ever-increasing number of new social and religious movements. These movements and new religions were led by colorful, charismatic figures such as Marcus Garvey and

Father Divine. Some of these religious leaders set up their own Southern-style churches in rented storefront spaces. A large number of these storefront churches were some form of Holiness denomination or the recently established Pentecostal church, and others were Baptist—but with a Southern, revivalistic worship style that closely resembled that found in the Holiness–Pentecostal churches that many migrants found more suitable than the worship style they saw at the sterile mainline churches. It is at this juncture that we pinpoint the origins of black gospel music as a distinct musical form.

More than any other form of religion with a substantial African American following, those within the Holiness–Pentecostal tradition became most central to the development of this new music. The Holiness–Pentecostal movement broadened to other parts of the country in the decades during which the Great Migration took place. Emphasizing the free exercise of the charismatic gifts of the spirit, including spontaneous, ecstatic worship, faith healing, prophesy, and glossolalia (also known as speaking in tongues), the type of worship generally found in Pentecostal worship services also had one additional characteristic: the belief in and practice of receiving the Holy Ghost and shouting. Shouting is a highly stylized form of ecstatic dance with origins in the ring shout that enslaved Africans also adapted in their worship services along with their songs and beliefs.

The highly syncopated, fast-tempo shout songs were of great importance in Pentecostal churches. These were accompanied by a much wider array of musical instruments than were commonly allowed in non-Pentecostal churches. Along with piano, organ, guitar, horns, and drums, the music was also collectively produced by the congregation by stomping feet, clapping hands, rhythmic tambourine playing, triangles, sticks, and whatever else congregation members had at hand. The openness of Holiness–Pentecostals to music that may have sounded less like European choral works in favor of lively, rhythmic music made it a perfect breeding ground for the development of gospel music in the future. The black church, in its acceptance of gospel music in some quarters and in its rejection in others, helped it to develop into the phenomenon it later would become.

### ***The Father of Gospel: Thomas Andrew Dorsey and Other Pioneers***

As we have seen, African American sacred music was a well-established part of American culture long before the dawn of the twentieth century. But the term *gospel music* was actually coined by Thomas A. Dorsey (1899–1993), himself a migrant to Chicago from the South.<sup>7</sup> Dorsey was born in Villa Rica, Georgia, to parents who were strongly rooted in the church. His father was a pastor and his mother an organist. After suffering financial difficulty, the family moved to the city of Atlanta, where

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Thomas A. Dorsey at the piano with his band, the Wandering Syncopators Orchestra, in 1923.



AP Photo

Thomas dropped out of school at the age of eleven to play piano in movie houses and vaudeville theaters. He later became a blues piano player in Atlanta brothels and clandestine parties. He left Atlanta for Chicago at the age of seventeen and, under the name Georgia Tom, eventually made a reputation for himself accompanying blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

Throughout the course of Dorsey's early life as a blues pianist, he developed a soft style of playing in order to avoid uninvited police attention from disturbing the peace in after-hours house (or rent) parties. At one point as a Chicago blues musician, Dorsey dabbled in writing sacred music. His first gospel composition was actually included in the second edition of the hymn book *Gospel Pearls*, published by the National Baptist Convention in 1921. This was the first collection of songs published by a black congregation describing them as gospel songs. Dorsey attempted to leave the world of secular music to use his talent in the Baptist church, but facing rejection of his music by most conservative black churches, he returned to playing secular blues music until he experienced a crisis in his life and gave up the blues in favor of gospel forever. Dorsey, however, had been influenced not only by blues artists but by Dr. Charles A. Tindley (1851–1933), of Philadelphia, a composer and publisher of early gospel music.



It is important to note that although gospel music was essentially a creative synthesis of musical forms associated with secular blues songs and religious lyrics, this new type of music was not immediately accepted in the mainline black churches. Many within the well-established northern Baptist and Methodist churches were very conservative in their opinions about what type of music was most appropriate in the context of the worship service. Frequently, pastors of these congregations rejected Dorsey's gospel songs because the music sounded too much like that heard in nightclubs and bars—places their church members were not supposed to be. Indeed, some of the songs that have come to be seen as traditional gospel songs (such as the highly successful “Move On Up a Little Higher,” recorded by Mahalia Jackson) sound very much like blues or other kinds of secular music played and heard during their original era.

Thomas A. Dorsey is recognized as the father of gospel music for first synthesizing his secular blues piano musical style and sensibility with lyrics that spoke of faith in God and redemption from the trouble of the world. He is credited with having written more than 400 gospel songs, many of which have become classics not only within the African American community but in American culture at large. One such example is the song “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” written in response to the tragic death of his beloved wife Nettie and their son in childbirth in 1932, which has become virtually an American classic, even among some non-African Americans.

### ***The Twentieth-Century Institutionalization of Gospel Music***

Thomas A. Dorsey is not only an important figure as gospel music's creator but also because he was responsible for several important ways of distributing this new music and institutionalizing it to allow it to endure long beyond his and his colleagues' initial efforts. Beyond authorship of particular songs, Dorsey's influence can also be seen in the way gospel music was marketed to the masses. He first set up a sheet music publishing company that not only published musical notation but the lyrics as well. His partner in this venture (the first publishing company featuring this new music) was gospel singer Sallie Martin (1896–1988). Raised as a member of the Church of God in Christ, Martin came to Chicago from Pittsville, Georgia, in order to work with Dorsey. She accompanied him as they traveled to local churches, introducing the music by performing gospel songs for the congregation. Dorsey also established a series of concerts in which gospel music was heard and the sheet music was sold to individuals. The songs were sold individually rather than requiring consumers to purchase a hymnal or entire song book in order to obtain particular pieces they wanted.

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Along with musician Kenneth Morris, a talented musician, arranger, and transcriber, Sallie Martin later went on to form another publishing company, the Martin and Morris Music Studio. The company was different from others in that it sold not only its own published gospel songs but those of other publishing houses as well. Within a relatively short time, theirs became the top publisher of gospel music in the country. Martin also formed the Sallie Martin Singers, a group that toured the country singing gospel music. Morris is the person responsible for introducing the Hammond organ into gospel music along with the piano, thus producing a distinctive sound that remained an essential part of the music for decades.

The importance of Dorsey, Martin, and Morris to the development of gospel music extended far beyond the creative acts of composition and performance; they were also instrumental in establishing it as an industry at its earliest stages. In 1932 Dorsey and Martin organized the National Association of Gospel Choirs and Choruses (NAGCC) as a national institutional structure—it became an important network that allowed Dorsey to promote new work and teach it to performers from around the country. Dorsey's national choir association set the stage by providing an institutional example and structure for James Cleveland to come along with the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA); Cleveland was greatly influenced by Roberta Martin, another important figure in the history of this music. Later, along with Shirley Caesar, Cleveland recorded the first live gospel album in 1962 (Savoy Records), the first gospel music artist to receive a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. Cleveland had worked with Dorsey in Chicago as a young man.

### EARLY GOSPEL STARS

Another prominent gospel music performer to emerge during this period was Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose church affiliation was also with the Church of God in Christ. Sister Rosetta, as she was commonly known, became the first gospel music star during the 1940s and 1950s, signing a recording contract with a secular label. Her story illustrates some important dimensions of gospel music's relationship to the Church. Sister Rosetta was one of gospel music's first crossover artists, achieving success playing in secular settings in addition to recording and playing for church-based audiences. But her secular successes were at times seen as problematic by people within the church, who felt she should make a choice and sing either secular music to secular audiences or gospel music to the church.<sup>8</sup>

Another of Dorsey's contemporaries was William Herbert Brewster (1897–1987), of the East Trigg Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Brewster also wrote some of the most popular gospel songs, including “Surely, God Is Able” and “Move On Up a Little Higher”—the latter of

**Mahalia Jackson**



*Library of Congress*

which was recorded by Mahalia Jackson (1911–1972), the Queen of Gospel, becoming the first gospel recording to sell more than a million copies.

**GOSPEL'S GOLDEN AGE AND FURTHER INFLUENCE**

Choirs and quartets dominated during the period between the 1940s and the 1960s as gospel music became an increasingly popular part of religious as well as secular radio airplay. Some of the most famous of these were the Clara Ward Singers, the Caravans, and the Soul Stirrers (led by Sam Cooke). With the coming of doo-wop, many groups that had originally been gospel singers switched over to secular R&B and soul music. Some of the most well-respected and influential performers in twentieth-century

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American popular cultural history, such as Little Richard, Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Patti Labelle, Gladys Knight, Dionne Warwick, and her younger cousin, Whitney Houston, all had their beginnings singing gospel music either as part of church choirs or touring groups. The influence of black gospel music and performance styles on America and the world can also be seen and heard in the work of successful musicians the world over, including the Beatles, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Rolling Stones, and Elvis Presley (still considered by some to be the King of Rock and Roll).

### *African American Sacred Music in the Struggle for Civil Rights*

The main argument of this essay has been that black sacred music gave voice to certain aspects of African American consciousness and carried multiple meanings and uses that ranged from religious to political. One final example of the adaptation of this sacred music into a political context can be found in the Civil Rights movement, beginning with the 1955 Montgomery [Alabama] Bus Boycott. Through the network of church leaders formed through the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the black churches that participated in the movement provided not only a communications network, a meeting place, and economic resources but also called on their religious faith and that of their followers for inspiration, using it as the basis for moral right-standing in the fight. The music that helped encourage and inspire nonviolent civil action was made up of songs adapted from spirituals and gospel music. Thus these religious songs were transformed into freedom songs that helped to galvanize situations and people and to provide ultimate meaning to political struggle.<sup>9</sup>

Most notably, the song “We Shall Overcome” was adapted from the gospel song “I Shall Overcome”; “Keep Your Hand on the Plow” was transformed into “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”; and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” became an anthem sung by marchers and protesters across the South. The sacred music of African Americans was once again appropriated and adapted to new, nonreligious purposes while still retaining its central themes of freedom, critique of inequality, and commentary on the world around them.

### *Contemporary Gospel Music*

Several larger categories are used in the recording industry to define the boundaries of contemporary Christian music. Traditional gospel is one of these. Work within this category generally represents recordings by choirs—frequently but not exclusively church based—and their style and repertoire tends to be more heavily weighted toward the more or less standard gospel songs and hymns, perhaps reinterpreted with limited

CeCe, left, and BeBe Winans perform during the Dream Concert at Radio City Music Hall in 2007.



*AP Photo/Jason DeCrow*

contemporary alteration. Groups within this category include John P. Kee (and the New Light Community Choir), Hezekiah Walker (and the Love Fellowship Choir), and Andraé Crouch.

Contemporary gospel pop artists include CeCe Winans, Yolanda Adams, Donnie McClurkin, Karen Clark Sheard, and Israel and New Breed. Quartets continue to be a strong presence within gospel music with acts such as the Williams Brothers, the Blind Boys of Alabama, and the Mighty Clouds of Joy. Urban gospel includes Kirk Franklin (and God's Property), Fred Hammond (and Radical for Christ), Donald Lawrence (and the Tri-City Singers), the duo MaryMary, Tye Tribbet, and Kierra "KiKi" Sheard. Other fusions of Christian lyrical content with popular musical idioms commonly associated with (or having their origins in) the black/African American experience include rap/hip-hop acts (such as KJ-52, Grits, the Gospel Gangstaz, T-Bone,

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and BBJ) and reggae acts (such as Papa San, Avion Blackman [formerly of the reggae group Christafari], and Sherwin Gardner).

Gospel music has become an extremely large and profitable industry. Several record labels, such as Verity, Gospo-Centric, and EMI-Gospel are at the forefront of producing acts whose music presents a Christian message. Across the country, certain markets, such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, Houston, and Atlanta, have radio stations dedicated to the gospel music format. Numerous gospel lifestyle and industry magazines such as *Gospel Today*, *Gospel Industry Today*, and *Gospel Flava*, as well as a multitude of Internet sites such as *GospelCity* continue to promote artists and publish news and commentary about the industry.

### ***African American Sacred Music and the Church: Tension and Coexistence***

Although the church and the form of African American sacred music that came to be known as gospel music are very closely linked, their relationship has not always been without serious tension. Lyrical content that expresses African American spiritual sensibilities and longings has always made some feel that the connection between this music and its numerous secular counterparts—from blues to hip-hop—has been far too close to serve the purpose of delivering the good news, or the gospel of salvation through belief in Christ. The life and career of gospel singer and musician Sister Rosetta Tharpe continues to provide an illustrative example of this philosophical divide as concerns the performance of African American sacred music. Sister Rosetta is often referred to as gospel music's first crossover star because of the popularity of her music outside Christian circles. She sang with both gospel and secular artists, appeared on early television variety shows, and played in nightclubs throughout the country, to the great dismay of those in her home church. Apparently, Sister Rosetta was unwilling to choose between performing within either a strictly religious or a secular entertainment context, rather preferring to be able to move freely between the two in what is sometimes referred to as straddling the fence. With her great success in the larger world of popular entertainment came the opprobrium of some of her fellow Christians—thus she never attained the stature of her contemporary Mahalia Jackson, who is still considered the queen of gospel music by many.

On the other side of this debate is the conviction that it is outside of the walls of the church—where so many people may never venture—that the message of salvation must be carried in order to bring into the fold the unchurched or those who have left fellowship for one reason or another. For this reason many of today's most successful performers of African American sacred music, although they may be subjected to some degree of disapproval, enjoy much more freedom to cross over and to

achieve recognition and acclaim in the secular music industry. In many respects they are encouraged to do so as a way of creating musical forms having broad appeal because of their similarity to R&B or other forms of secular music but that express a Christian theological outlook (or at least an inspirational message of encouragement for hearers). Some of contemporary Christian music's most successful artists include those who continue to be among the best-selling artists on secular ratings charts and among secular audiences. Such artists as Kirk Franklin, Yolanda Adams, the duo MaryMary, Donnie McClurkin, and BeBe and CeCe Winans are among this group of gospel artists who have enjoyed great crossover success.<sup>10</sup>

Not only are gospel music artists enjoying success beyond the bounds of the black Christian community, but some of them are also gaining access to the center of American popular cultural production more broadly. Most notable in this respect is the artist Kirk Franklin, who became the first gospel music artist to score a mainstream feature film (2001). Along with the sister duo MaryMary, Franklin was depicted on the cover of a subsequent issue of *Gospel Today* magazine with the question "Have They Gone Too Far?"—an indication that there remain limits for which the black Christian community considers acceptable levels of success and mere self-promotion in the form of selling out the Christian message for secular success and personal gain. Recent years have seen a number of high-profile leaders of large African American megachurch congregations become heads of their own record labels, a move that allows them to shift their relationship to the music from one of consumer to that of producer.

In conclusion, African American sacred music—just like African American religion and religious institutions—has had to serve purposes that go far beyond expressing and ministering to the spiritual needs of the community. This music expressed and continues to express African American sensibilities, using and adapting existing musical idioms while simultaneously creating new ones. This music also had political purposes. Through songs such as "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" or "Everybody Talkin' Bout Heaven Ain't Goin' There," African Americans voiced their critique of ongoing systematic domination in the United States. Civil Rights leaders adapted traditional gospel and spiritual songs into freedom songs that encouraged and helped mobilize the masses of African Americans to challenge and ultimately defeat the Jim Crow system of the American South. Even today, African American sacred music continues to have multiple meanings and uses, and its influence extends far beyond the walls of the church.

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## African Americans and Rock 'n' Roll

*Maureen Mahon*

Rock 'n' roll is a quintessentially American musical product, the result of African American and European American crossings and borrowings. Rock 'n' roll has a long list of black progenitors and an early history as a form played by and for black people under the name rhythm and blues in the 1940s and 1950s. Over the years, however, rock 'n' roll has come to be viewed as white music for white people, a result of its association with white performers and audiences. Black musicians who strike out in the white-dominated rock 'n' roll terrain are in the peculiar position of looking like anomalies in a genre created by black people. Rock 'n' roll's first performers were predominantly poor, black, and Southern. Over the years, this initial association with the nation's outsiders and its appeal to youth who were resisting elements of mainstream society helped rock 'n' roll develop an image as an antiestablishment art form driven by the quest for rebellion, liberation, and unreserved self-expression, including the expression of sexuality, a taboo in mainstream America. The idealized story of rock 'n' roll is of openness and experimentation, a musical embodiment of the American dream of self-fashioning through a quest for a new sound and a better beat. Telling a more accurate story requires historicizing the black American presence in and contribution to rock 'n' roll, addressing the challenges that its black practitioners have experienced.

The major limitation for black Americans in rock 'n' roll is the racially defined labeling and marketing systems that the recording industry has always used for popular music. Assessing the findings of its 1987 study of the industry, the NAACP concluded, "No other industry in America so openly classifies its operations on a racial basis. At every level of the industry, beginning with the separation of black artists into a special category, barriers exist that severely limit opportunities for blacks."<sup>1</sup> These barriers are long-standing, as evidenced by *Billboard* magazine's early decision to use a separate chart to track the sales of music targeted to black audiences. Since 1942 the chart has been called Harlem Hit Parade, Race, Rhythm

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and Blues, Soul, Black, Hip Hop, and Urban.<sup>2</sup> These names distinguish music made for black audiences from music made for white audiences, exemplifying and perpetuating segregationist belief and practice. Commenting on the impact of this mentality on music categories, music critic Robert Palmer observed:

By the sixties, “rock and roll” carried such “white” connotations that writers began referring to the new, rhythm-oriented styles in black popular music first as “soul,” then “funk.” By the time rap and hip-hop came along, many younger artists took pains to differentiate their music from “rock and roll” altogether.<sup>3</sup>

Segregation is one of the cornerstones of popular music marketing. It dominates the industry’s approach to signing and promoting artists, restricting the type of music they perform and the audiences they reach. This article discusses the effect of segregation and racially defined marketing practices on key African American figures in the history of rock ‘n’ roll and charts their contributions to the form even in the face of these limitations. It also traces how, in the years since the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, black Americans have been distanced from the form but have continued to participate in it. Success as a professional musician depends on talent, drive, and luck—but, as this article demonstrates, for African Americans in the field of rock ‘n’ roll, the ability to express one’s musical vision also requires negotiating the additional burden of race.

### FROM RHYTHM AND BLUES TO ROCK ‘N’ ROLL

In 1949, in an effort to find a more palatable term, *Billboard* magazine changed the name of its black music chart from “race” music to “rhythm and blues.”<sup>4</sup> Rhythm and blues (R&B) encompassed a spectrum of music linked by the blackness of its performers and audiences. Aesthetic factors also connected music in the R&B category: “honking” or “screaming” saxophones, propulsive piano, loud drums, vocals shouted over instrumentation, and danceable boogie-woogie rhythms that presaged the importance of the beat in rock ‘n’ roll. R&B began to gain radio exposure as a small coterie of white disc jockeys programmed it on their shows. AM radio signals were wide reaching, and the black music played on stations such as Nashville’s WLAC could be heard in the Caribbean and Canada and as far west as the Rocky Mountains.<sup>5</sup> These shows reached young white listeners as well as their intended black audiences.

In June 1951, Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed began calling his R&B radio show *Moondog’s Rock’n’Roll Party*.<sup>6</sup> He hoped the new term would downplay the blackness that R&B indexed and ease the crossing over of the

Little Richard in *Mister Rock and Roll*, 1957.



*Paramount Pictures/Photofest*

music. *Rock 'n' roll* indicated “music that was black (‘R&B’) in style but not necessarily made by black artists or aimed at black audiences.”<sup>7</sup> Freed’s new label was a colloquial term for *sex* in the black community, but rocking and rolling also meant dancing, and sanctified churchgoers “rocked” when the spirit took them. The convergence of the sexual, physical, and spiritual in the term *rock 'n' roll* is fitting, given the fusion of these features in the music. Changing R&B’s name to package black music for white audiences is significant in light of the form’s history of simultaneous dependence on and erasure of black people, a contradictory relationship to blackness that is at the heart of the form and the challenges that African Americans face in it.

It is impossible to isolate a single moment when rhythm and blues transformed into rock 'n' roll, but *Rocket 88*, released in 1951, is often identified as the first rock 'n' roll record.<sup>8</sup> Credited to Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats, the song was recorded by Brenston and guitarist Ike Turner and his Kings of Rhythm at Sun Studios. The song has many of the features associated with rock 'n' roll: a lyric about a car, a prominent boogie rhythm, and well-amplified, distorted guitar. Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Studios and the record’s producer, asserted that *Rocket 88* paved the way

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for rock 'n' roll, encouraging "young white males and females . . . to get even more interested in rhythm and blues or black music."<sup>9</sup> Phillips, a white Southerner, had opened his studio to record the blues and R&B of black musicians such as Brenston and Turner, but he soon recognized the limits that black artists faced in a segregated nation. He began to search for white musicians who could play with what he called "the Negro sound and the Negro feel," certain he could profit if he did.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, he discovered and recorded Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, white Southerners who had learned the Negro sound and feel from black musicians.

Before the arrival of these performers, black R&B artists such as Ruth Brown and Fats Domino were charting with songs that shaped rock 'n' roll. Brown signed to the independent R&B label Atlantic Records, where she was directed to approach music with a new rhythm. Her first hit, "Teardrops From My Eyes" (1950) stayed on the R&B charts for 11 weeks.<sup>11</sup> Other releases, including "5-10-15 Hours" (1952) and "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean" (1953), were similarly successful. Known for a vocal squeak that influenced Little Richard, Brown was dubbed Miss Rhythm in recognition of her facility with a new beat that went on to shape rock 'n' roll. Brown, like many other R&B artists, saw little difference between R&B and the more lucrative crossover form called rock 'n' roll. She explained:

When they called it rock 'n' roll it was only rhythm and blues now being done by white kids and accepted and danced to and being played on the Top 100 and the Top 10 stations. . . . Like Fats Domino said, "I had been singing rock 'n' roll 15 years before they started calling it that."<sup>12</sup>

Born in New Orleans, Antoine "Fats" Domino Jr. played boogie-woogie piano but sang with a country twang. Domino is one of rock 'n' roll's best-selling performers; with the exception of Elvis Presley and the Beatles, he achieved more gold records than any artist working in rock 'n' roll's first decades.<sup>13</sup> A stout man who often wore a smile, Domino had a calm sound and warm, laid-back delivery. Never overtly sexual, Domino was a "safe" black performer, a fact that may have eased his acceptance by white audiences who were enticed by the "clean arrangements, simple melodies, casual feels, and catchy lyrics" that characterized his music.<sup>14</sup> Having started his career at the beginning of the 1950s, Domino was the R&B artist who most successfully crossed over to the rock 'n' roll audience, producing hits like "Ain't That a Shame" (1955), "Blueberry Hill" (1956), "I'm Walkin'" (1957), and "Walking to New Orleans" (1960).<sup>15</sup>

Although at first *rock 'n' roll* was a term for R&B being promoted to white listeners, "the change in name induced a change in the music

itself.”<sup>16</sup> To engage its teenage audience, rock 'n' roll's producers simplified R&B's rhythm, accenting the backbeat, and narrowed its lyrical references to teen themes.<sup>17</sup> Rock 'n' roll was a young person's music and seasoned R&B artists, with their adult voices and adult lyrical content, had a difficult time crossing over to young white audiences.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, black rock'n'rollers conveyed youthful energy, sang about young people's concerns, and developed unusual visual styles that helped to sell their new rhythms. Along with Fats Domino, the black artists who were most successful in the early years of rock 'n' roll—Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry—popularized an aesthetic and attitude that laid the groundwork for future generations of rock'n'rollers.

Commenting on his contribution to the genre, Little Richard (born Richard Wayne Penniman) proclaimed, “I'm the innovator, I'm the emancipator, I'm the originator, I'm the architect of rock 'n' roll.”<sup>19</sup> Little Richard's effervescent flash and over-the-top enthusiasm drew fans to the genre while providing a primer on how to rock and roll. Little Richard had a remarkable visual style: an outrageously high pompadour, pancake make-up and eyeliner, and sharp suits. He played the piano with ferocity and sometimes stood on his instrument. Mixing boogie-woogie and blues, Little Richard performed in traveling carnivals, medicine shows, and the black clubs that made up the chitlin circuit. His creative and commercial breakthrough came with the song “Tutti Frutti” (1955). Little Richard recalled the recording as being a result of an attempt to distinguish himself from other R&B singers at a session: “I started singing ‘Tutti Frutti’ as loud as I can. ‘A Womp-Bomp-a-Loo-Momp Alop-Bomp-Bomp! Woool!’ Just screaming. And people said, ‘Oh, he's gone crazy.’”<sup>20</sup> “Tutti Frutti” was a risqué ditty that Little Richard sang in clubs.<sup>21</sup> Once his production team decided that the song could be a hit, they enlisted the help of Dorothy La Bostrie, a New Orleans songwriter, to clean up the lyrics. “Tutti Frutti” sold 500,000 units and was successful on both the R&B and pop music charts; later releases such as “Rip It Up” (1956), “Long Tall Sally” (1956), and “Good Golly, Miss Molly” (1958) also fared well. Black and white teenagers were attracted to his infectious songs and ecstatic vocal blend of “sighs, moans, screams, whoos and breathless panting” that later generations of rock 'n' roll singers emulated.<sup>22</sup>

As a teenager, Bo Diddley (born Ellas Otha Bates McDaniel) shifted from violin to guitar and began experimenting with rhythm. He explained, “I couldn't play like Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf and all these people so I had to go back in the corner and try and develop a style of my own and I stumbled upon that rhythm and that's the rhythm that I made my first record with.”<sup>23</sup> Taking fragments of children's rhymes and fusing them to a Latin rhythm, Bo Diddley created what has come to be called the Bo Diddley Beat, a shuffling rhythm that turns

up repeatedly in rock 'n' roll. Bo Diddley's search for a new sound is typical of musical innovators in all genres: he was looking for a unique form of expression. He explained, "I mainly play chords and stuff like that and rhythm. I'm a rhythm fanatic. I played the guitar as if I were playing drums. That's the thing that makes my music so different. I do licks on the guitar that a drummer would do."<sup>24</sup> Like the other early rock 'n' rollers, Diddley telegraphed his musical difference visually. Although he and his band members were neatly attired, the group looked a bit peculiar. The square and V-shaped bodies of Diddley's guitars (which he designed and built himself) were futuristic and cartoonish.<sup>25</sup> The traditional bass, drum, and guitar ensemble was supplemented by an electric violin and maracas. He also made the unconventional decision to feature women instrumentalists in his band, a vivid sign that this new music was upsetting a tradition.

As a guitarist, singer, songwriter, and performer, Chuck Berry (born Charles Edward Anderson Berry) is rock 'n' roll's most influential early performer. His pithy lyrics, filled with internal rhymes and wordplay and delivered with a rapid fluency, are models of masterful storytelling. Beatle John Lennon called Chuck Berry "the greatest rock 'n' roll poet," and Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, on whom Berry's influence is clear, described him as having "the whole sound—rhythm, lyrics—the sound" of rock 'n' roll.<sup>26</sup> In spite of his stature as a rock 'n' roll pioneer, Berry is modest when describing the development of his classic rhythm:

The first time I heard that was in one of Carl Hogan's riffs in Louis Jordan's band . . . I love T-Bone Walker: slurs and it's bluesy. So, put a little Carl Hogan and a little T-Bone Walker and a little Charlie Christian, the guitarist in Tommy Dorsey's band, together: Look what a span of people that you will please. And that's what I did . . . And making it simple is another important factor, I think, that resulted in a lot of the artists understanding and being able to play my music. If you can call it "my music." But there's nothing new under the sun.<sup>27</sup>

Aware of the commercial limitations of R&B, he made musical and lyrical choices that he hoped would help him reach as broad an audience as possible. He overlaid his R&B derived riffs with country-inflected vocals that featured lyrics about school, cars, and love, subject matter with which young rock 'n' roll fans could identify. Starting with "Maybellene" in 1955, Berry released a string of hits now recognized as rock 'n' roll classics: "Roll Over, Beethoven" (1956), "Rock and Roll Music" (1957), "Johnny B. Goode" (1958), "Sweet Little Sixteen" (1958), and "Almost Grown" (1959). Delivering these songs live, Berry put on a show intended to maintain audience attention, dropping down into a "duckwalk" while playing the guitar. His signature moves, along with his sound, solidified Berry's place in the

rock 'n' roll canon. The racial ambiguity of Berry's hillbilly-inflected music and a vocal twang that did not "sound black" eased his acceptance by white audiences but also created confusion when people who had heard his records saw him play. They expected a white man to step on stage. Berry's effort to gain a white audience was successful, but in pitching his music to white teens, Berry and his music were distanced from black audiences.

## ROCK 'N' ROLL REPERCUSSIONS

Rock 'n' roll developed alongside the growing Civil Rights movement. Although rock'n'rollers were not political activists, they were at the forefront of integration. Their milieu was not lunch counters or public schools, but the concert halls, clubs, television programs, and movie theaters where they performed to mixed and majority white audiences. Low-budget rock 'n' roll films including *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956) and *Mr. Rock & Roll* (1957) featured black rock'n'rollers such as Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Chuck Berry, and LaVern Baker performing for approving white teenagers. The rock 'n' roll tours that brought the music to communities across the country were integrated. White artists such as Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers performed alongside Fats Domino and Chuck Berry, touring for months at a time and sometimes playing several shows a day. These tours were difficult for black artists whose experience on the road—especially in the South—included police harassment, refusal of service at white-owned eateries, and often futile quests for accommodations that would accept black patrons. In some cases, they had to play one show for black people and one for white people to appease club owners who didn't want "race mixing" at their venues; in these cases, they usually received payment for only one show.<sup>28</sup> Describing a run-in with the police while touring in Georgia, Bo Diddley recalled:

I was made to get out of the car, me and my band, and because we didn't have no liquor . . . they pulled out the gun and said, "Since you all are musicians, entertainers, you all entertain us and we'll let you go." . . . They made us take off the [doo-] rags and dance . . . With a .38 in your face and a shotgun, you'll do flips and everything. In order to deliver the music, we went through some terrible ordeals to continue, to get to where it has come now. We built a hell of a highway.<sup>29</sup>

The major problem was that rock 'n' roll exposed white people to black culture, upsetting an entrenched preference for denying the significance of African Americans. Rock 'n' roll's distinguishing features contributed to the frenzied embrace of the form among youth and the impassioned negative

response from their elders. Guardians of propriety regarded the music's sound and its performers' antics as threats to decency. Moreover, they routinely characterized rock 'n' roll as "jungle music" and "primitive," attacking the form at its black roots. Sometimes they attacked the performers physically. Little Richard remembered, "I had police take me off the stage in Augusta, Georgia . . . and beat me with blackjacks, but I had so much energy I just bounced off them. . . . 'You're down there singing all this nigger music to these white kids.' That's what they said."<sup>30</sup> Producer Sam Phillips noted that white rock'n'rollers were also harassed: "They accused us of causing white people to love 'niggers.' They accused us of mutilating music by trying to integrate and trying to copy and just totally destroy all that was good in music. Believe me, the resistance on this was absolutely incredible."<sup>31</sup>

Involvement in rock 'n' roll, it seemed, could compromise the morals of white youth, especially young white women who were often featured—on television and in photographs—screaming enthusiastic responses to the performances of black male rock'n'rollers. The specter of miscegenation conjured by these images led some white adults affiliated with white citizens' groups to organize against what they called "vulgar animalistic nigger rock and roll bop."<sup>32</sup> Rock 'n' roll's revolutionary fusing of black musical style and white teenage frustration was potent and presumed dangerous. Blackness and sexuality bubbled in the music and in the hip-swinging performances of its leading artists. Rock 'n' roll's connection to these taboos fueled white youths' interest. Not only did rock 'n' roll have a great beat, it also irritated their parents. Rock 'n' roll's image as a form of youthful rebellion grew out of these tensions.

The moral panics stirred by rock 'n' roll did not suppress the music, but the actions of the mainstream recording industry limited some of its artists. When rock 'n' roll first emerged, major label executives assumed it was a fad. They had long ignored black rhythm and blues—both forms were recorded on independent labels—and saw no reason to embrace the fledgling offshoot. The majors gambled that they could ride out rock 'n' roll's popularity by using the white pop artists they had under contract to compete with genuine rock'n'rollers recording on independent labels. Their white acts would cover songs originated by black artists, allowing the labels to tap into the rock 'n' roll market without having to commit to it. This approach not only made economic sense but fit long-standing white American resistance to black American advancement. Little Richard, whose songs "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally" were covered by white pop singer Pat Boone, argued, "They didn't want the white kids looking up at this big ol' greasy black guy out of Georgia, out of Mississippi, out of Chicago. They wanted their kids to see a little smooth white boy looking pretty and on duty."<sup>33</sup> Covers submerged the vibrant energy of musical blackness and circumscribed the career possibilities of black people.



Major labels released their cover versions soon after the originals and used their considerable influence on radio stations and distributors to flood the market with their artists' work. This made it almost impossible for the black artists' original versions to receive the kind of radio exposure that generated sales. This was the case for Etta James, the dyed-blond vocalist who recorded an answer song to the racy Hank Ballard and the Midnighters tune "Work With Me, Annie" in 1955. Changing James's original song title "Roll With Me, Henry" to the tamer "The Wallflower" seemed like a good way for James to get radio airplay, but white pop singer Georgia Gibbs covered the song before James's version had a chance at the charts. Describing her outrage at Gibbs's "Suzy Creamcheese version," James observed:

[Gibbs] turned "Roll With Me, Henry" into "Dance With Me, Henry." Now if you listen to the original version, I really was talking about dancing. . . . It's just that the word *roll* had a sexual suggestiveness prudes couldn't handle. Georgia's cutesy-pie do-over went over big. My version went underground and continued to sell while Georgia's whitewash went through the roof. Her Henry became a million seller. I was happy to have any success, but I was enraged to see Georgia singing the song on *The Ed Sullivan Show* while I was singing it in some funky dive in Watts.<sup>34</sup>

James's comments indicate the importance of double entendre in R&B and the way that covers proffered a single, safe meaning. Her use of the term *whitewash* for this process is apt: it was not a simple "cleaning up" but an actual whitening that occurred when a white singer copied a black artist's song. Performers whose work was covered had no legal protection; no law prohibited copying an arrangement. Independent labels reaped financial rewards for licensing songs to the majors, but the artists who originated the songs received nothing. As teens became more educated consumers, they demanded the black originals—but covers undercut black performers and enabled major labels to profit from black creativity without compensating black people.

White covers of black R&B and the growing number of white rock'n'rollers put a wedge between black performers and rock 'n' roll so that, as Bo Diddley noted, "R&B became what we was doing and rock 'n' roll became what the white kids was doing."<sup>35</sup> Racialized definitions of musical categories, covers, and the racism that limited black opportunity in the United States marginalized the black pioneers of rock 'n' roll from the form they had created. By the 1980s, it became apparent that they had also lost out on the financial side when Ruth Brown, famous in her heyday for a vocal squeak, became a "squeaky wheel" about the economic exploitation

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of early R&B artists. Brown's label, Atlantic Records, was known as "The House That Ruth Brown Built" with her consistent chart success in the 1950s, but Brown herself received little financial benefit from her labor. Working with a tenacious legal team on behalf of several R&B artists, Brown went public with a battle for royalties. Testifying before Congress and commenting in the media, she revealed industry practices that contributed to the precarious financial position that many R&B artists were in as they approached retirement age. Most artists in the 1950s were paid a flat rate to record—Brown received \$69 per side—and recouped little in terms of royalties.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Brown had received no royalty payments between 1964 and 1983, even though her records sold throughout this period.<sup>37</sup> The case demonstrated that record labels often went to great lengths to avoid paying royalties.<sup>38</sup> With public exposure and legal decisions, Brown and other artists began to receive back royalties. To further assist R&B pioneers, Brown helped start the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in 1988, using seed money from the labels to provide financial and medical assistance to the black forebears of rock 'n' roll.

### ROCK 'N' ROLL VOCAL GROUPS

By the end of the 1950s, the artists most identified with rock 'n' roll had vanished from the scene: Little Richard returned to the Church, Elvis Presley had joined the army, Jerry Lee Lewis was ostracized for his marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin, and Chuck Berry was entangled in legal proceedings stemming from charges that he violated the Mann Act. In spite of these setbacks, rock 'n' roll did not disappear. It shifted form as vocal groups took center stage. Rooted in the harmonized singing of black gospel groups and secular street corner singing, doo-wop had found a place on the R&B and pop charts during the 1950s. This rock 'n' roll vocal style, performed by black artists, was named for the nonsense phrase sometimes used in its background vocals.<sup>39</sup> Among the most popular groups were the Coasters, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, and the Platters, whose single "The Great Pretender" (1955) was the first doo-wop record to top the pop charts.<sup>40</sup> Many vocal group recordings resulted from the collaboration of white songwriters and producers and black vocalists. For example, the white songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller penned the rock 'n' roll classic "Hound Dog" (1953) for black R&B singer Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton (Elvis Presley covered it in 1956), "There Goes My Baby" (1959) for The Drifters, and humorous scenarios of teen life such as "Young Blood" (1957), "Yakety Yak" (1958), and "Charlie Brown" (1959) for the Coasters.

The vocal group tradition changed as all-female groups (known as "girl groups" because of the youth of the performers) became prominent in the

early 1960s. Performing songs written by professional songwriters, the Shirelles, the Chiffons, the Chantels, the Crystals, the Marvelettes, and the Ronettes introduced a new style of rock 'n' roll. The girl groups continued rock 'n' roll's focus on teen love, but from a female perspective. The Shirelles' "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" (1960), written by Carole King and Jerry Goffin, for example, articulates a concern many young women struggled with: the consequences of giving in to a boyfriend's pleas for intimacy. Although both black and white girl groups recorded, the leaders of the movement were young African American women, prompting songwriter Jerry Goffin to observe, "In the 1960s, God was a black girl who could sing."<sup>41</sup> With few exceptions, however, the writers and producers were white. Among the most influential was Phil Spector, who created "the wall of sound." For his recording sessions, Spector would assemble an enormous orchestra—two pianos, two drum kits, as many as five guitars, and three basses, as well as large horn and string sections—whose sheer size produced a loud, echoing sonic wall. The singers on these recordings had brash vocal power, but they received little individual credit for their work. Darlene Love, one of his primary vocalists, contributed lead and backing vocals to numerous Spector recordings that were released under other artists' names. The lead singer of the Ronettes, Veronica Bennett (known as Ronnie Spector once she married Phil Spector), managed to forge an individual identity. She had the ideal rock 'n' roll voice: an emotional catch in the throat accompanied by stuttered "oh, oh, ohs" that conveyed the passion and frustration of adolescence. Her sound and sultry appearance helped her become an early rock 'n' roll sex symbol. Phil Spector's greatest chart successes came through his work with black girl groups in songs such as "He's a Rebel" (1962) and "Da Doo Ron Ron" (1963) by the Crystals and "Be My Baby" (1963) and "Walking in the Rain" (1964) by the Ronettes.

Another major contributor to the vocal group sound was Berry Gordy Jr., a jazz-loving independent record producer who founded Motown Records in Detroit in 1960. Gordy hired African American songwriters, producers, singers, and musicians, making the label an exception to the white producer/black artist model that dominated the era's rock 'n' roll production. Gordy wanted his label's music to have appeal and sales beyond the black community, and his staff mastered the art of mining and modulating musical blackness to create a listener-friendly sound that meshed with popular tastes. Motown's records blended black gospel and white pop into songs replete with catchy hooks, memorable key phrases, and danceable rhythms. At "Hitsville, USA," as Gordy nicknamed his label, staff members applied the assembly line practices of their hometown's automobile industry to music production. Company songwriters such as William "Smokey" Robinson Jr., Norman Whitfield, and the team of Eddie

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Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Brian Holland were encouraged to find and use formulas that produced hit records. Performers followed company dictates about the material they recorded and the way they recorded it. A band of former jazz musicians, known as the Funk Brothers, played on most of the tracks, helping to give the label its sound.

Attention to quality control was intense, and the public image of the artists was a concern. Motown artists trained with Maxine Powell, whose “finishing school” taught the mostly working-class Motown singers the rules of etiquette and self-presentation. Choreographer Cholly Atkins provided dance moves and body postures that rocked—but in a tasteful way. This type of polishing was in keeping with Gordy’s desire to go beyond the chitlin circuit, presenting his acts in elite venues, including on television. It also prompted the charge that Motown artists were so carefully handled to meet the presumed preferences of white audiences that they compromised their blackness. Motown’s middle-class striving and pursuit of crossover reveal Gordy’s investment in the Civil Rights movement’s goals of integration and resulted in the label becoming one of the most profitable black-owned businesses in U.S. history. Over the years, Motown released an unprecedented number of pop chart hits by the Miracles (featuring Smokey Robinson), Martha and the Vandellas, the Marvelettes, Mary Wells, the Four Tops, the Temptations, Marvin Gaye, “Little” Stevie Wonder, the Supremes (featuring Diana Ross), Gladys Knight and the Pips, and the Jackson Five. Holland–Dozier–Holland alone penned twenty-eight songs that became Top 20 pop hits.<sup>42</sup> During the 1960s, the Motown staff created what Gordy had dubbed “The Sound of Young America,” a body of music that made an indelible imprint on rock ’n’ roll and U.S. culture.

African American vocal groups promoting their music in the early 1960s probably could not have imagined that their primary competitors would be white British bands playing black American blues, R&B, and rock ’n’ roll. Not even the members of the Beatles, the English band that started this shift, expected to succeed in the United States. They assumed that American audiences would prefer the black American artists who originated the type of music they played. Industry professionals also had low expectations; in fact, no major label would take on the stateside release of the Beatles’ first single, leaving Vee-Jay, an independent, black-owned label to issue the first American copies of “She Loves You” (1964).<sup>43</sup> As it turned out, the English band took the U.S. teenage record-buying public by storm and launched the British Invasion of the American pop market. The success of bands such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Animals confirmed Sam Phillips’s supposition that white people with “the Negro sound and feel” would be able to sell black music. The success of British bands precipitated the disappearance of many black vocal groups from the pop charts. Racial commonality mattered and white American kids, it turned

out, were happy to see other white kids perform the black music that they had begun to embrace as their own.

## **1960s ROCK**

By the late 1960s, rock 'n' roll was a central part of youth culture. The sound and attitude of rock 'n' roll were changing, and fans began to call their music "rock." Performers began to write their own material, and the subject matter expanded as references to cars and love were complemented by poetic commentaries on politics and everyday life. Musicians began focusing on producing albums intended to make conceptual and

### **Jimi Hendrix**



*Photofest*

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artistic statements, and rock became a site of authentic self-expression. The standard of dress changed as both performers and audiences followed the era's casual approach to self-presentation. White artists and fans dominated the scene, and the majority of young African Americans focused on soul music. Still, black American musicians were involved in rock: the most prominent were musical giants Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix and psychedelic cult figure Arthur Lee.

Working in Los Angeles, Arthur Lee formed a band with Johnny Echols, a black guitarist, and Bryan Maclean, a white guitarist and songwriter. Inspired by the sound of folk rock and the British Invasion, they set aside the R&B covers they had previously felt obligated to play and began to write their own material in 1965. Lee explained, "I realized I could sound like the Byrds and the Beatles, and I said, 'Hey, *this* is you. Stop trying to be an imitator' [of R&B acts]." <sup>44</sup> Maclean, steeped in the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, and Lee, immersed in the British sound, composed songs that meshed classic American pop with a garage band's grit: jangly guitars ringing out against lushly orchestrated strings and brass. Taking the name Love, the band appropriated one of the words most associated with the burgeoning hippie movement, or Love Generation. Lee was a proud part of this counterculture and often lamented that his friend Jimi Hendrix got credit for being the first black hippie. <sup>45</sup> As Love's front man, Lee wrote and sang surreal lyrics, contributing to a style of writing that evoked the imagery and emotions unleashed in the "acid trips" made possible by the ingestion of LSD, the counterculture's drug of choice.

Love performed in the major rock 'n' roll venues in Los Angeles, becoming the top band on the circuit. Commenting on Love's profile in the scene, Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek observed, "Arthur Lee and Love, they were in charge. We would see them play the Whisky A Go-Go and think that one day we wanted to be like Love." <sup>46</sup> The first rock band to sign to the Elektra label, Love released its first and eponymous album in 1966, featuring a cover of "Hey Joe," a song later made famous by Jimi Hendrix. In 1967, with more original material under its belt, Love released the albums *Da Capo* and *Forever Changes*. The latter is widely considered to be a rock 'n' roll masterpiece. Replete with arcane titles such as "Maybe the People Would Be the Times or Between Clark and Hildale," the album's beautifully arranged songscapes jostle against images of decay and mutation that indexed the visual and emotional effects of the Vietnam War. <sup>47</sup> Lee's resistance to touring stymied Love's ability to break out beyond the Los Angeles scene, and Love disbanded in 1972. Their music circulated on record, however, and took hold in Great Britain, where fans and musicians celebrated Arthur Lee as an influential innovator and the "prince of orchestral acid pop." <sup>48</sup>

Arthur Lee's low profile contrasts with the fame of Sly and the Family Stone, who burst onto the airwaves in 1968 with the infectious song

"Dance to the Music." Formed two years earlier, the seven-member band was the brainchild of San Francisco Bay-area resident Sylvester Stewart, a disc jockey and record producer known as Sly Stone. With Freddie Stone, his brother, on guitar, his sister Rose Stone on keyboards, Cynthia Robinson on trumpet, Jerry Martini on saxophone, Larry Graham on bass, and Greg Errico on drums, Sly Stone (on electric organ) founded an interracial, mixed-gender band. A rare example of black and white men and women making music together, the band played a vibrant fusion of soul and rock and seemed to embody Love Generation and Civil Rights-era ideals of positive energy and racial harmony.<sup>49</sup> Their songs featured soul horn blasts, gospel inspired vocals, and the prominent bass riffs of Graham, who expanded the rhythmic territory of funk that James Brown was exploring. Unlike bands with a single lead singer, the members of the Family Stone shared vocal duties, incorporating a range of vocal timbres into a song. Songs such as "Everyday People" (1968), "Sing a Simple Song" (1968), "Stand!" (1969), and "Everybody Is a Star" (1970) tapped popular catchphrases and childhood chants and conveyed life-affirming messages to a nation facing serious political challenges, notably the Vietnam War and the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.

Significantly, Sly and the Family Stone was a predominantly black band, but they were marketed to the white rock 'n' roll audience, an approach Sly Stone had insisted on when he signed his contract with CBS Records.<sup>50</sup> In spite of the label executives' concern that a white audience would not "get" the band, it became a favorite on the rock circuit. They were among the few black performers invited to Woodstock, the 1969 concert that was the counterculture's most important gathering. Sly and the Family Stone's profile changed with the 1971 release of *There's A Riot Going On*. The joyous chants were replaced with a starker sound and vision. These tendencies were present in the acerbic "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" (1969), and *Riot* marked a complete shift. Spare with muted and distorted vocals, the songs stretched beyond radio-friendly length. A breakthrough album, *Riot's* content was too black and too bleak for some white listeners.<sup>51</sup> Exacerbated by the erratic behavior of Stone, the album precipitated a break with the mainstream audience that the group's more accessible follow-up, *Fresh* (1973), could not heal. By 1975, Sly and the Family Stone had disbanded, leaving behind an extraordinary body of music.

Guitarist Jimi Hendrix is rock's most recognized black star. Born in Seattle, Hendrix began playing guitar when he was thirteen. By the time he was in his early twenties, he was touring as a sideman on the R&B circuit, playing in black clubs before black audiences with artists such as Little Richard and the Isley Brothers. Hendrix settled down in New York City in the mid-1960s and performed in Greenwich Village's predominantly white rock 'n' roll clubs.

His break came when Chas Chandler, a former member of the British Invasion band the Animals, convinced Hendrix that his music would connect with the white British bands and fans of black American blues and R&B. In 1966, Hendrix relocated to England, changing the spelling of his name from Jimmy to Jimi on the way. Chandler assembled a band for his protégé—Noel Redding on bass and Mitch Mitchell on drums—and the trio began recording. Their first release, *Are You Experienced* (1967), sold well in England, and the songs “Purple Haze” and “Hey Joe” established Hendrix as an artist worth watching.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience made its unforgettable U.S. debut at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. Using the showmanship he learned on the chitlin circuit, Hendrix performed with an arresting, sexually suggestive style. In addition to playing his guitar behind his back and with his teeth, he made metaphoric love to the instrument before concluding the show by setting it on fire. Some critics worried that his performance pandered to white stereotypes of black male sexuality, but others were enthusiastic about his inventive playing. The bottom line was that Hendrix had captured the American rock ‘n’ roll community’s attention. He released *Axis: Bold As Love* (1967) and *Electric Ladyland* (1968), critical and popular successes, and became one of the highest-paid performers of the era, reigning at the top of the scene until his untimely death in 1970. Hendrix’s influence reverberates in rock ‘n’ roll. His use of volume, distortion, feedback, and electronic effects define how rock guitar should sound, and his blend of technical wizardry and passionate playing set the standard for the guitarists who have followed him.

Hendrix’s relationship to black and white mainstreams demonstrates the challenges faced by a black artist in the rock milieu.<sup>52</sup> Hendrix was not marketed to black audiences; although he had black fans, his audience was predominantly white. In an era of increasing black cultural consciousness, Hendrix’s association with his white band mates and the white hippie counterculture, coupled with the sound of his high-volume, blues-derived guitar playing, marginalized him from the mainstream of black American culture.<sup>53</sup> Explaining the reason black Americans accepted the black rock ‘n’ roll of Sly Stone, but rejected that of Hendrix, music historian Nelson George notes, “Hendrix drew from a style blacks had already disposed of; Sly shrewdly stayed just a few steps ahead of the crowd.”<sup>54</sup> And, as cultural critic Greg Tate observes, “Hendrix wasn’t just a racial-political heretic but a musical one as well.”<sup>55</sup> The voice, Tate argues, was the most important instrument to black audiences, and Hendrix’s vocals were far from the powerful soul man’s voice that appealed to mainstream African Americans.<sup>56</sup>

In the late 1960s, Hendrix began to leave behind his showy entertainer persona and focus on musicianship. He also seemed to assert the blackness that had been muted and questioned, splitting off from his white band



mates and working with black musicians. In 1970, he released *Band of Gypsies*, the self-titled document of his new all-black band with drummer Buddy Miles and bass player Billy Cox. As with Stone's *Riot*, the "blacker" sound of the Band of Gypsies did not sit well with some of Hendrix's white fans. Up to that point, they could erase or ignore his race, characterizing him as someone who "didn't seem black." This allowed them to account for the presence of a black man in their midst without disrupting notions of "normal" black behavior or questioning the general absence of black people in their scene. It also explained the appeal of someone from a reviled demographic. Rock critic Charles Shaar Murray sees Hendrix's "whitening" as a response to a long standing conundrum: "the central thrust of twentieth century American popular music [is] the need to separate black music (which, by and large, white Americans love) from black people (who, by and large, they don't)."<sup>57</sup> The usual approach to the dilemma is to celebrate white performers who possess "the Negro sound and feel," but the process took a different form with Hendrix. His white fans separated him from his black identity and proclaimed his "raceless" musical brilliance.

As a black man in the white counterculture, Hendrix was hypervisible. Another experience for African Americans in rock is invisibility. For example, few people—black or white—comment on the fact that one of the producers who helped usher in the folk-rock movement was black. Tom Wilson produced Bob Dylan's first electric album—*Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), a rock 'n' roll landmark—as well as Dylan's biggest hit single, "Like a Rolling Stone" (1965).<sup>58</sup> In 1966, Wilson produced *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, Simon and Garfunkel's debut album. It was his idea to add an electric guitar, bass, and drums to the duo's acoustic hit "The Sounds of Silence"—and the new version went to number one.<sup>59</sup> Wilson also signed experimental rockers Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground to recording contracts and produced some of their early tracks. Sometimes visible and always audible were the numerous black women who provided background vocal support to many of the best-known white artists of the era.<sup>60</sup> Black women vocalists such as Darlene Love, Minnie Riperton, Chaka Khan, Patti Austin, Claudia Lennear, Venetta Fields, Madeline Bell, and Merry Clayton lent their vocal talents to the recordings of artists such as Joe Cocker, Rod Stewart, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Steely Dan, and Dusty Springfield. White British artists in particular were passionate about black music and, in addition to styling their vocals in ways that "sounded black," they drew on the vocal resources of black women to lend more musical authenticity to their projects. The list of artists with whom Merry Clayton recorded indicates the pervasive presence of black women in rock. Clayton sang on the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* (1969), Carole King's *Tapestry* (1971), and Joe Cocker's *With a Little Help from My Friends* (1970), as well as on recordings by Buffalo Springfield, Leon Russell, Jerry Garcia, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Neil

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Young, Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Phil Ochs, and Rare Earth. Clayton is best known for her riveting vocals on the Rolling Stones' single "Gimme Shelter" (1969).

### BLACK ROCK 'N' ROLL IN THE 1970s

The crossover success of Sly and the Family Stone, Hendrix, and Motown, as well as the strong sales of the soul produced on independent labels such as Stax and Atlantic convinced major labels of the profitability of music by African American artists. In the early 1970s, they launched black music departments to produce and promote this music. Although this meant expanded opportunities for black artists, few of whom had been signed to major labels until then, the labels maintained a racially defined approach. By the end of the 1960s, rock was in place as a white youth-oriented form distinct from its parent rock 'n' roll. With few exceptions, black men and women were confined to the clearly demarcated field of black music. Still, in spite of labeling practices that separated black people from rock, the early 1970s saw a new breed of black rock'n'rollers such as the Isley Brothers, Parliament, Funkadelic, Labelle, the Ohio Players, Mandrill, Rufus (featuring Chaka Khan), War, Mother's Finest, and Betty Davis. These artists were inspired by the artistry of Stone, Hendrix, and James Brown and were influenced by the sonic and visual impact of the rock counterculture.

Usually, these bands were large, with seven, eight, or nine members—double the size of most white rock bands—and featured keyboards, horns, and percussion alongside bass, drums, and guitars. The black rock groups' "funk" rhythm, pioneered by James Brown in the late 1960s, placed the emphasis on the first beat of the measure. In funk, the bass was prominent and the polyrhythmic interplay between instruments was central. This music was confusing to a segregated marketplace. Although audible blackness in backing vocals and the efforts of white lead vocalists to sound black were common parts of rock production, the actual blackness of a lead singer and band members, coupled with the mixing of rock, soul, and Latin styles, led to black rock groups' categorization outside of rock. These bands were often "too black" and bass-heavy to fit comfortably on album-oriented rock (AOR) radio and "too rock" and raucous for black stations. Indeed, many of these black self-contained bands muted the guitar and sweetened their sound to secure airplay on black radio.<sup>61</sup> Although sometimes referred to as "black rock," the music produced by black bands during this period is usually categorized as funk, a label that maintained the racially segregated process of naming and selling music.<sup>62</sup>

The rock 'n' roll impulses of high volume, pleasurable revelry, and challenging the mainstream, however, were very much a part of the performance aesthetic of funk as exemplified by bandleader George Clinton's Funkadelic

and Parliament. During the 1960s, the Parliaments had met the expectations of the vocal group era, performing doo-wop harmonies and wearing matching uniforms and processed hair. Working on the periphery of Motown, the group had one hit, "(I Wanna) Testify" in 1967. Not long after this, Hendrix and Sly Stone captured Clinton's attention, and he set about transforming his group. He called his new band Funkadelic, a merging of funk and psychedelic, the musical genres his band was exploring. By the mid-1970s, Clinton was also leading a band with the resuscitated name Parliament. The two bands shared personnel and became known as an ever-expanding collective that included the classically trained keyboard-player Bernie Worrell and William "Bootsy" Collins, a young bass player who had cut his professional teeth in James Brown's band. With Funkadelic, Clinton developed his version of rock 'n' roll. He mined the unmentionable and celebrated the life force through irreverent references to sex and partying, while addressing threats to good times. The band played gigs with the Stooges and the MC5, white Detroit bands known for their garage rock sound. Funkadelic was similarly testing the limits of volume, distortion, and feedback; its early recordings *Funkadelic* (1970), *Free Your Mind . . . and Your Ass Will Follow* (1970), and *Maggot Brain* (1971) feature the guitar pyrotechnics of Tawl Ross and Eddie Hazel in multidimensional songs that owed as much to Pink Floyd, the English psychedelic band, as they did to Hendrix.

Funkadelic resisted the strictures of soul performance and stretched out with epic rock jams and irreverent stage antics. Band members wore oversized hats, enormous platform boots, and sparkling capes, and used stage props such as the Mothership, a spaceship that the band beckoned down to the stage with its funky riffs. These visual markers were part of the black science-fiction-meets-comic-book cosmology that Parliament-Funkadelic wove. For all their irreverence, the band also slipped in social commentary in quips such as "Think! It ain't illegal yet!" and the album title *America Eats Its Young* (1972). Funkadelic did not enjoy much chart success, but it did have cult credibility. Parliament, developed with a greater commercial focus in mind, garnered hits for the collective. In 1978, Clinton hit the jackpot with two R&B number one songs: "Flash Light" by Parliament and "One Nation under a Groove" by Funkadelic.<sup>63</sup> The music Clinton made with Parliament-Funkadelic is among the most sampled in hip-hop, and its breadth and experimental vitality inspired the next generation of black rock musicians, white funk rockers (such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers), and rap iconoclasts Outkast.

## PUNK AND ROCK IN THE 1980s

The musicians who emerged in the 1980s were the first generation to be raised with the sound of rock 'n' roll as a given and the first to come of age in a period when rights for African Americans were legally protected. As

members of the post-Civil Rights generation, many of these black musicians had grown up in integrated contexts and expected to have the same rights and access as white Americans.<sup>64</sup> They were fans of black musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, James Brown, Miles Davis, and George Clinton, as well as of white bands such as Led Zeppelin. They were also paying attention to a significant change in music that had started in the mid-1970s when a coterie of musicians that had wearied of the excesses of corporate rock responded with a stripped down sound. Eventually called punk, the new music featured simple three-chord songs that expressed the rage and disillusion of the young people who performed it. Punk bands such as London's Sex Pistols and New York's Ramones inspired a new generation of youth to pick up instruments and form bands of their own.

Among them were the young black men who formed Bad Brains, a leading band in the Washington, D.C., homegrown punk rock scene. Raised in the Maryland suburbs of the nation's capitol, Dr. Know (born Gary Miller) on guitar, Darryl Jenifer on bass, Earl Hudson on drums, and his brother H. R. (born Paul Hudson) on vocals started their band in the late 1970s. They began as a fusion band but changed their focus after hearing an album by the punk band the Dead Boys and seeing reggae artist Bob Marley.<sup>65</sup> The resulting link between punk rock energy and Rastafarian philosophy changed the sound of punk. Taking advantage of the musicianship they had developed when playing fusion, Bad Brains perfected the high-speed playing, rapid-fire lyrics, dramatic pauses, and performance intensity that characterized hardcore, the new style of punk that the quartet helped create. The band included straight-up reggae songs in their performances and recordings, and their versatility and musicianship were unusual in a scene that celebrated amateurism. Working far outside the mainstream recording industry, Bad Brains followed punk's Do It Yourself ethos and made their first recordings at local studios that were supporting the work of musicians in Washington's burgeoning punk rock scene. Their song "Pay to Cum" (1980) is often identified as hardcore's first single; their albums *I Against I* (1986) and *Attitude: The ROIR Sessions* (1989), a collection of early singles, are indispensable punk documents. The members of Bad Brains embraced Rastafarianism and sported long dreadlocks, choices that indexed their blackness. Still, although Bad Brains had black fans (many of whom went on to form bands of their own), the band stood out for being an all-black band in the white punk rock context. They were a fixture at Washington's 9:30 Club and then moved to Manhattan, where they made their name at CBGB, the birthplace of punk in the United States. Bad Brains influenced black rockers such as Fishbone and Living Colour and also hard-rocking guitar bands such as punk's Minor Threat, metal's Metallica, and indie rock's Nirvana.<sup>66</sup>

As the 1970s wound down, another major black rock 'n' roll artist emerged. Multi-instrumentalist, singer, and songwriter Prince (born Prince

Rogers Nelson) launched his eclectic career with two fairly standard R&B albums. *For You* (1978) and *Prince* (1980) displayed his musical promise and yielded “I Wanna Be Your Lover” (1979), a song that reached the pop Top 20 and hit number one on the R&B charts. With his first albums, Prince acceded to the recording industry’s standard approach for handling black artists: he created music that proved successful in the R&B market before being actively marketed to the mainstream. He started to express his broad musical vision with *Dirty Mind* (1980) and *Controversy* (1981), albums on which he connected sexual and social liberation and treated the spiritual and the erotic as two sides of an enticing coin. Mining the history of black rock ‘n’ roll, Prince meshed hard rock, funk, and soul impulses and produced music with exemplary guitar playing, vocal expressiveness, and rhythmic energy. He performed with James Brown–style screams and spins and was a clear musical descendent of Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone. He embraced the sound of a fiery lead guitar and a vision of multiracial unity, forming a mixed-race, mixed-gender band. Prince grabbed attention through sexually evocative song titles such as “Head” and “Soft and Wet” and a stage presentation in which he wore black bikini underwear and high-heeled boots. His

**Prince (as The Kid) in Albert Magnoli’s 1984 film *Purple Rain*.**



Warner Bros./Photofest

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glossy pompadour, sexual ambiguity, and transgressive lyrics recalled Little Richard and continued the rock 'n' roll spirit of rebellion on albums such as *1999* (1982), *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Sign o' the Times* (1987).

Although Prince received a great deal of exposure on MTV, the 24-hour music-only cable television station, access to the network was not a given for black artists. Launched in 1981, when the majority of cable television subscribers were suburban whites, MTV used a format that it presumed would appeal to its white, middle-class, and under-twenty-five target audience.<sup>67</sup> Music by black performers was rarely programmed. In MTV's first year and a half, the station played 750 videos, fewer than twenty-four of which featured black artists. In 1983, funk rock guitarist Rick James was among the first to publicly charge the station with racism: his album *Street Songs* (1981) had sold three million copies, but he could not get MTV airplay. Industry executives worried that absence from MTV would deny black artists the improved sales that were almost guaranteed for artists played on MTV. Ultimately, it took pressure from CBS/Epic Records to convince MTV to program black artists. The label threatened to withhold all of its artists' videos unless the station put Michael Jackson's video for the song "Billie Jean," from his album *Thriller* (1982), into rotation. The popularity of Jackson's video helped make *Thriller* a blockbuster and paved the way for black musicians such as Prince, Lionel Richie, Donna Summer, and rock 'n' roll survivor Tina Turner on MTV.

Tina Turner's arrival on MTV was the final phase of a hard-fought comeback. Born Anna Mae Bullock, Turner started her career in the mid-1950s, when Ike Turner hired her to sing with his R&B band. Ike changed her name to Tina to help create a more exotic image.<sup>68</sup> Recording as the Ike and Tina Turner Revue even before they were married, they scored an R&B hit in 1960 with "Fool in Love" and toured tirelessly during the 1960s and early 1970s. Tina Turner was revered for her powerful voice, exuberant dancing, and shapely legs. The undisputed Queen of Rock, she appeared on the cover of the second issue of *Rolling Stone*, the counterculture's premier magazine.<sup>69</sup> After divorcing Ike in 1976, Tina started over professionally, performing in small clubs and building a show as a solo artist. She received assistance in her endeavor from white British musicians who were longtime fans. Both Rod Stewart and the Rolling Stones invited her to perform with them in 1981, giving her access to their audiences. Before long, she had secured a record deal. On *Private Dancer* (1984), Turner left behind the rough edges of R&B for a slicker sound rooted in the commercial pop of the era. It was a remarkably successful move. With the help of heavy MTV rotation of the single "What's Love Got to Do With It?," *Private Dancer* sold ten million copies. The Top 5 album had three Top 10 singles and garnered Grammy awards for Turner who, after almost three decades in the business, finally got her commercial due.<sup>70</sup>

Tina Turner in 1985



*Photofest*

## THE POLITICS OF BLACK ROCK

Turner's story notwithstanding, commercial success was hardly guaranteed for black rock musicians. Fishbone's trajectory exemplifies the dilemmas faced by many black rockers. The Los Angeles band made jubilant musical leaps from ska to punk to funk to metal and developed a reputation for live performances infused with frenzied energy. Formed as a sextet when they were in junior high school, Fishbone's original members were Angelo Moore on vocals and saxophone, Walt Kibby on vocals and trumpet, Kendall Jones on guitar, Chris Dowd on keyboard and trombone, and brothers John Norwood Fisher and Phillip "Fish" Fisher on bass and

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drums, respectively. The band's promising first single, "Party at Ground Zero" (1985), was a euphoric, ska-inflected dance number, but its releases on Columbia Records, which included *Truth & Soul* (1988), *The Reality of My Surroundings* (1991), and *Give a Monkey a Brain* (1993), did not achieve significant chart success in spite of critical praise, consistent positive response to live shows, and inclusion in high-profile rock events such as the inaugural Lollapalooza traveling rock music festival in 1991. One common explanation was that their eclectic sound caused them to fall through the cracks, not quite right either for rock radio or for black radio. The irony was that the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Jane's Addiction, white bands that had come out of the same genre-blending Los Angeles scene as Fishbone, were commercially successful.

It seemed that racial barriers were at least partly to blame for Fishbone's situation. In spite of rock 'n' roll's countercultural image, the industry that sold the music followed the American tradition of segregation. By the mid-1980s, the recording industry had been operating with race-based assumptions about music taste for a long time: rock music was made by and for white people; black people were only interested in R&B and dance music. In 1985, a collective of New York-based African American musicians, artists, and music industry professionals formed an organization to respond to this situation. Led by cofounders Vernon Reid (a guitarist), Greg Tate (a writer), and Konda Mason (an artist manager), the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) addressed the racial segregation of music in the recording industry and provided a support network for black rock musicians playing outside the industry-dictated confines of black music. Founded during the conservative Reagan era, when Civil Rights-era gains were being eroded at the federal level, the BRC drew attention to the fact that racism was still an issue. So was historical amnesia. BRC members asserted that contrary to the dominant image of rock music as white music, the form derived from black music and was developed through the innovations of black artists.

Reclaiming the black contribution to rock 'n' roll was also a way for BRC members to justify their musical taste in the face of the common charge that black people who played rock were trying to be white. On the contrary, their argument went, they were engaged in a black cultural practice that white people had appropriated. The BRC stressed that black and white Americans alike needed to acknowledge the black roots of rock 'n' roll. Claiming that "rock and roll is black music and we are its heirs," the BRC critiqued recording industry practices that limited black musicians to only a few forms of musical expression.<sup>71</sup> Using the language of expressive freedom so valued in the rock community and of rights so important to African American political organizing, the BRC declared the musical independence of black musicians and united artists who played punk, funk, fusion,



hard rock, and metal. The organization presented concerts showcasing black rock bands and tribute shows celebrating black rock forebears. The BRC also sponsored panel discussions and released recordings that compiled the music of member bands. Over the years, artists who have affiliated with the organization include Jean Paul Bourelly, Burnt Sugar, the Bus Boys, Don Byron, the Family Stand, Dave Fiuczynski, Nona Hendryx, Kelvyn Bell, Michael Hill's Blues Mob, Meshell Ndegeocello, Sekou Sundiata, 24-7 Spyz, and Living Colour, the most commercially successful act to emerge from the BRC.

It was Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid's frustration with the contradictory reception his all-black rock band was receiving in the mid-1980s that led him to call the meetings that started the BRC. Living Colour had

**Living Colour, circa 1980s. Shown from left: Will Calhoun, Vernon Reid, Corey Glover, Muzz Skillings.**



*Photofest*

a reputation as one of New York City's best unsigned bands, but the major label executives Reid met with were not prepared to sign a black rock band. Although the publicity that the BRC generated may have helped, the band's big break came when Rolling Stone Mick Jagger became a supporter of the band and financed some of the band's early demos. Living Colour finally got a deal—with Epic Records—and released its first album, *Vivid*, in 1988 with Reid on guitar, Corey Glover on vocals, Muzz Skillings on bass, and William Calhoun on drums. Living Colour was unquestionably a rock band. Influenced by the volume, distortion, and guitar-centered arrangements of Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and Carlos Santana as well as the propulsive rhythms of funk, the band forged a distinctive, heavy sound. The band's visibility was raised when it opened for the Rolling Stones on their 1989 Steel Wheels tour and when "Cult of Personality," a single from *Vivid*, was placed into heavy rotation on MTV. *Vivid* went platinum, and the band won Grammy awards in the rock category, an unprecedented achievement for an all-black band. The band continued its genre-crossing on follow-up albums *Time's Up* (1990) and *Stain* (1993)—Doug Wimbish replaced Skillings on the latter. Living Colour disbanded in 1995 and regrouped in 2000.

The members of Living Colour and the Black Rock Coalition made critiquing the segregated recording industry part of their mission. Other black rock 'n' roll artists who were their contemporaries eschewed this type of direct engagement while producing work that also did not fit into the black music category. In 1988, Tracy Chapman surprised the recording industry with the success of her self-titled debut album. An acoustic guitarist, singer, and songwriter, Chapman had a stripped down, folk-informed sound. Her rich alto voice and spare songs captured the imagination of a broad base of fans both black and white, male and female. Her Top 10 single "Fast Car" and the song "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" presented vignettes about people on the margins who longed for better lives. *Tracy Chapman*, a multiplatinum album, helped her garner a Best New Artist Grammy. A year later, rocker Lenny Kravitz released his debut *Let Love Rule* (1989). Like Chapman, he produced a record that returned to the aesthetic of an earlier era, drawing on Hendrix and the Beatles. Once signed to a major label, Kravitz was marketed, like Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, to a rock audience and, like Living Colour and Chapman, never received much airplay on black radio stations. Kravitz has received multiple Grammy awards and his albums *Are You Gonna Go My Way* (1993) and *Greatest Hits* (2000) achieved multiplatinum sales. Above all, he has enjoyed a long, commercially successful career—a rarity for black rock musicians.<sup>72</sup>

During the 1990s and 2000s, a critical mass of black rock musicians emerged. Along with Kravitz, Chapman, Living Colour, and Fishbone came Terence Trent D'Arby, Dionne Farris, Marc Anthony Thompson

(who performed under the name Chocolate Genius), Toshi Reagon, Ben Harper, Stew (born Mark Stewart) of the Negro Problem, Meshell Ndegeocello, Cody ChesnuTT, Faith, Tamar-kali, the Veldt, Apollo Heights the Family Stand; Follow for Now; Weapon of Choice; Earl Greyhound, and TV on the Radio. In spite of their growing number, most of these artists had to explain their engagement in rock and nonparticipation in rap and R&B. When rapper Mos Def formed his all-black rock group Black Jack Johnson in the early 2000s, he fielded so many questions that he told a reporter, "This is the most I've had to explain myself about any project. And if I was [sic] a White boy doing it, I wouldn't be going through this questioning. I'm treated like I'm approaching something that's foreign to me. My artistic pockets are being patted down because I want to do rock 'n' roll."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in the new millennium, the presence of black people in rock 'n' roll was still unusual enough to warrant coverage from media outlets looking for a good story. Articles discussed the latest wave of black rockers, noting their persistent attachment to a genre in which black people were at once foundational and marginal.<sup>74</sup>

The turn of the millennium also saw the arrival of books and films documenting the experiences of African Americans in rock 'n' roll.<sup>75</sup> James Spooner's self-produced, low-budget documentary *Afro-Punk* helped black punk rock fans across the United States build a sense of community through the Internet, film screenings, and concerts at local clubs. The Do It Yourself mode of production that Spooner used to make and distribute his film had long been a part of punk rock. As the new century began, musicians of all races were beginning to use the independent model. Increasingly accessible technology—low-cost, professional-quality studio equipment and computer programs for mixing music—enabled artists to produce, promote, and distribute their music on their own. The Internet facilitated the promotion of this music on artists' Web sites and through social networking sites such as Myspace.com. The online environment enabled the sale of music in digital format, challenging the primacy of compact discs as people in their teens and twenties—a crucial demographic—revealed a preference for this option. This approach allowed artists to avoid the pitfalls of major label deals (really production loans repaid by artists) and gave them greater creative control over their products. Instead of waiting to be discovered, artists could make their music on their own terms.

For African American artists who had witnessed in frustration the ineffective ways major labels promoted black rock artists such as Fishbone and who were tired of being told to play a more marketable style of black music, independent production offered an opportunity for self-determination and a respite from the racism that festered in the mainstream recording industry. In fact, the major label deal that had so preoccupied BRC members and

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most fledgling rock bands in the previous decade became somewhat less important. Although a major label still offered the broadest distribution possibilities, the independent approach to making and circulating music was viable.

Limitations remain, but these technological shifts offer ways for contemporary black rock'n'rollers to circumvent old problems embedded in an industry that has historically resisted their presence and impeded their progress. A commitment to rock music puts African American musicians in the position of having to negotiate the demands and expectations of a racially segregated professional environment while following their creative preference for artistic integration. They have been involved in this struggle since the beginning of rock 'n' roll, and in the new millennium, they are still rocking, still striving for access and success.

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## Hip-hop Moguls

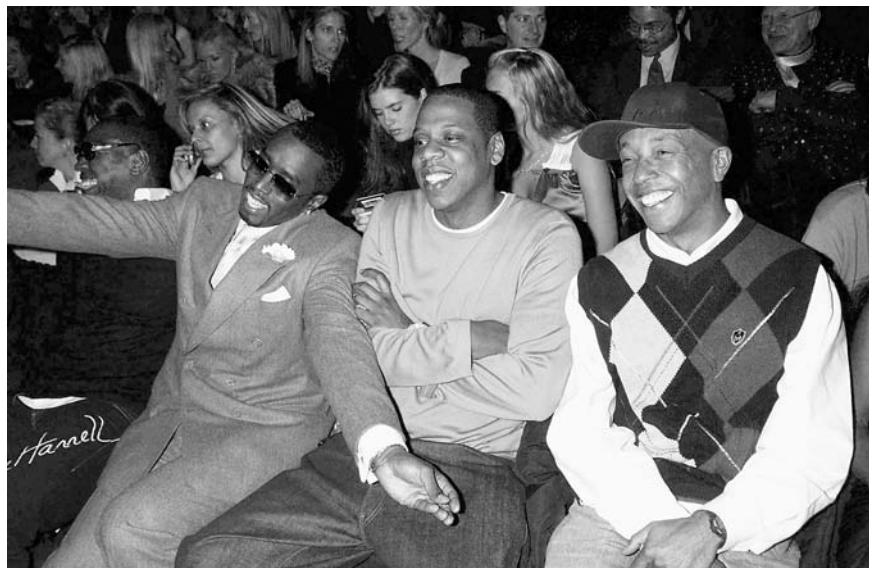
*Christopher Holmes Smith*

During the waning years of the Clinton administration, and at the peak of the dot-com stock market bubble, black entertainer-cum-entrepreneurs such as Russell Simmons, Sean “Diddy” Combs, Percy “Master P” Miller, Damon Dash, and Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter reached a new threshold of public recognition and acclaim for their ability to legitimize and diversify hip-hop’s commercial appeal. In a time of imminent technological dislocation in the recording industry, all these men became famous for turning the relatively segmented market for urban music into a sprawling mainstream empire of lifestyle-based merchandise spanning fashion, restaurants, soft drinks, film and theatrical production, and personal services. Under their leadership—seemingly overnight—it became possible for the business of hip-hop culture to become a defining feature of the culture itself. This trend represented a profoundly new direction within the hip-hop tradition.

Throughout the late 1970s, 1980s, and early to mid-1990s, rappers had regularly rendered lyrical compositions that reflected a deep-seated “double-consciousness” toward the music industry. On the one hand, songs such as EPMD’s “Please Listen to My Demo” expresses the ardent desire every unknown MC had to be discovered by a record label’s A&R representative and summarily signed to a deal that would signal the beginning of a long and lucrative career.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, songs such as A Tribe Called Quest’s “Show Business” depicts record companies and their executive leadership as nothing more than duplicitous and opportunistic hucksters intent on peddling a watered-down version of rap music and hip-hop culture to the mainstream audience for a fast profit.<sup>2</sup> Rappers’ pronounced level of mistrust for big business in general, and music industry managerial practice specifically, stemmed from popular memory of how black artists and musicians had been exploited in the early days of rhythm and blues.<sup>3</sup> Throughout black America, impressions of record label procedures were significantly influenced by grassroots “stories of chart-topping

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Left to right: P. Diddy Combs, Jay Z, and Russell Simmons during the Zac Posen Fall 2005 Collection, New York.



*AP Photo/Jennifer Graylock*

black artists who died penniless because they didn't have the financial wherewithal to own their own product or the ability to compete with mainstream record labels."<sup>4</sup> Neither the significant precedents of African American ownership established in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s by record label heads such as Berry Gordy and Clarence Avant nor the mainstream taste-making acumen so ably demonstrated by market-moving impresarios such as Quincy Jones completely revised the abiding black social common sense about the more dubious aspects of the recording business.

Against this historical legacy of limited industry enfranchisement, the emergence and rise to power of visionary young black entrepreneurs such as Simmons, Combs, Miller, Dash, and Carter captivated the attention of music fans, industry critics, the popular press, and the broader creative community. The hugely influential HBO cable TV series *The Sopranos* even featured a veritable "hip-hop mogul" as the central protagonist in an episode during its premier season in 1999. The episode, entitled "A Hit Is a Hit," presented the story of a wealthy rap entrepreneur named "Massive Genius" (Bookeem Woodbine) who confronts a Jewish mobster affiliated with the Soprano mafia family in order to collect unpaid royalties for a distant relative who had scored a hit record in the doo-wop era. In this respect, the rap mogul resembles a capitalist avenger



whose wealth represents not only individual gain but also a moral claim for material reparations on behalf of his racial fellows.

Simmons, known as the Godfather of Hip-hop because of his pioneering efforts to grow hip-hop as both entertainment and a lifestyle, began his career as a local rap promoter in New York City during the late 1970s. In 1984, he partnered with Rick Rubin, a white college student who was running a record label out of his dormitory at New York University. Together the two men created Def Jam Records, a seminal rap imprint that went on to launch some of the most influential rap acts in history, including Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, and Public Enemy. In 1999, Simmons sold his stake in Def Jam to Seagram Universal Music Group for \$100 million. In 2004, Simmons also sold his Phat Fashions clothing line to the Kellwood Company for \$140 million. Currently, as CEO of Rush Communications, Simmons oversees a wide variety of ventures, including television, theater, and film production, finance, mobile telephony, and philanthropy.

Miller is the founder and CEO of No Limit Enterprises, an entertainment and financial conglomerate that became known for a range of influential guerilla marketing techniques. Before Miller's forays into the industry, rap artists had traditionally focused on merely the creative side of the music while shunning the business and financial aspects. All that changed in 1996, when Miller signed a music distribution deal with Priority Records for his No Limit label that enabled Miller to retain 100% ownership of his artists' master recordings and keep 85 percent of their record's sales, Priority obtaining 15 percent of revenues in return for pressing and distribution. Miller subsequently made hundreds of millions of dollars from this deal, and his profitable track record in recordings, in the then-nascent direct-to-video category, and in a diverse array of ancillary products raised the bar for rappers' expectations of professional autonomy.

Combs is CEO of Bad Boy Worldwide Entertainment Group, a holding company that includes the \$400 million Sean John clothing and fragrance line in addition to restaurants and a record label. Like many of the other moguls, Combs—who is known for his lavish parties in the Hamptons vacation area of East Long Island, NY—has been extremely successful at leveraging his celebrity as an extension of his business enterprises.

Dash cofounded Roc-A-Fella Records in 1996 with star rapper Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter and Kareem "Biggs" Burke, later helping to found the Rocawear urban fashion brand, which in short order was reportedly grossing \$300 million annually. In 2004, Dash sold his interest in Roc-A-Fella to Universal-owned Island Def Jam Records for \$10 million. He also sold his stake in Rocawear to Carter for \$30 million. He has subsequently founded the Damon Dash Music Group, and his other businesses include America Magazine, Armadale Vodka, Dash Films, Pro Keds sneakers, and Tired watches, providing financial backing for his wife Rachel Roy's clothing

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line, nightclubs, and a professional boxing management and promotion company.

Carter exploded on the rap scene in 1996 as Roc-A-Fella Records's signature act. Known for his laid-back vocal delivery and uncanny ability to bring street and pop vernaculars together in his musical productions, Jay-Z went on to garner significant critical acclaim while becoming one of the best-selling rappers in industry history. In December 2004, after having announced his retirement as a performer, Jay-Z was appointed president and chief executive of Def Jam Recordings, Roc-A-Fella's parent company, which prompted bitter buyout negotiations over Roc-A-Fella's music and apparel divisions with his former business partners. While head of Def Jam, Carter reportedly earned \$8–10 million in annual compensation. In March of 2007, Jay-Z sold the rights to the Rocawear brand to Iconix Brand Group for \$204 million in cash. Currently, Carter is part owner of the New Jersey Nets NBA franchise and the 40/40 Club sports bars and has been instrumental in marketing efforts for brands such as Anheuser-Busch's Budweiser Select and HP's notebook computers. Most recently, in keeping with the rapid state of flux in the industry, Jay-Z broke with Def Jam and signed a 10-year, \$150 million deal with the Beverly Hills-based concert giant Live Nation. As CD sales continue to plummet, such "360" deals, encompassing recordings, concerts, and merchandising, are being considered as the most viable near-term business model for the ailing industry.<sup>5</sup> Through all of these ventures, Carter, like Combs, has become a legitimate pop cultural icon as paparazzi chart nearly every move he makes, whether alone, with his entourage, or in the company of his wife, pop and R&B diva Beyoncé Knowles.

The extent to which a wave of financial speculation accompanied the rise of hip-hop moguls to celebrity status in the mainstream press—and the degree to which the mogul phenomenon served as a cultural metaphor for "boom times"—is exceedingly significant.<sup>6</sup> The cultural studies media scholar Stuart Hall suggests that it is crucial to examine the social circumstances that adhere within a specific social discourse at any given time. He calls such examinations the theorization of "articulation." For Hall the concept of articulation presents "both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures to certain political subjects."<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the emergence of the new "mogul" parlance in regard to rap's executive class should not be seen as a "natural" occurrence that stemmed solely from the self-directed actions of a handful of "great men." Instead, Hall's theory of articulation invites interested observers to consider the "hip-hop mogul" notion as utterly contingent upon how disparate cultural phenomenon gradually became woven into a very particular pattern of interpretation.

Any assessment of the mogul discourse's political effects, therefore, must take serious consideration of the broader social relationships that enabled the discourse itself to coalesce. In line with discursive analysis based on Hall's theory of articulation, it is noteworthy that literature surveys suggest that strong correlations were made in the mainstream, ethnic, and industry press between hip-hop moguls, their collective cultural impact, and the stock market mania that swept the land in the late 1990s.

According to historian Edward Chancellor, speculative manias in the stock market recollect the scenarios prevalent during Renaissance fairs and carnivals in which people's pent-up energy is unleashed and the typical progression of the social hierarchy is temporarily turned upside down. Just as Renaissance carnivals undermined the authority of the Church, speculative manias reverse capitalism's regulatory social values of patience, honesty, thrift, and hard work.<sup>8</sup> As in carnivals, festivals, and fairs, tantalizing conditions of transcendence are imbued within all speculative outbreaks, moments wherein a new dispensation seems in the offing and recourse to "the fundamentals" no longer lays claim to the recognition of value. Indeed, during periods of speculative euphoria, traditional rules of conduct are not nearly as persuasive to social actors as is emulating behavior by the crowd at large. At topsy-turvy moments such as these, when the appropriate calculus for valuation is anyone's guess, conventional wisdom becomes inflected with a populist accent as the abiding utility of once hallowed metrics of discernment and judgment are called into question. During the 1990s bull market, an explosion of entrepreneurial and speculative activity in the technology, media, and telecom sectors—collectively codified as a "New Economy"—triggered a similar paradigm shift in U.S. culture and society.

Between 1980 and 2001—a period when the United States underwent a wrenching transition from a manufacturing to a service basis—the phrase "New Economy" initially functioned in the American press as a way of describing the human devastation wrought by deindustrialization. By the mid-1990s, the phrase was used more often than not to identify the dawning of a technological utopia that synthesized neoliberal philosophies advocating open markets and free trade abroad, a managerial and market-based approach to multicultural diversity at home, and—above all else—perpetual economic growth. The popularization of the Internet was crucial to this national change of disposition toward the new service-oriented economy. As the mainstream press experimented with more accessible ways of reporting its social and industrial effects, the Web became a benign symbol of epochal change that people could understand and embrace; the more comfortable people felt with the technological shifts the Internet represented, the more they felt emboldened to invest in the companies charting its course.

Historians point to the initial public offering for Netscape Communications in August 1995 as the tipping point when average Americans stopped hating the New Economy and learned to love it instead.<sup>9</sup> A week after Netscape's debut, according to the *New York Times*, "investors fell all over one another trying to snap up the first publicly available shares" of the Web-browser manufacturer. What startled the *Times* and many others about the flotation's appeal to investors was that Netscape had "no earnings, hardly any sales and looming competition from [the] big boys."<sup>10</sup> Netscape's cash windfall and stunning defiance of traditional business valuation helped unleash a wave of financial speculation in similarly fledgling operations, many with much worse long-term prospects than Netscape's. Indeed, as news began to spread that the Net offered opportunities to get rich fast, Americans plowed their liquid assets into the stock market at an unprecedented rate, undertaking a feverish quest to find the next upstart technology company whose market capitalization was primed to soar into the stratosphere. Whereas in 1952 only 4 percent of Americans owned common stock, just two years after Netscape's fateful IPO, 40 percent of Americans were in the market.<sup>11</sup> As stock indexes skyrocketed and the speculative mania proliferated, representations of the new synergy between Wall Street and Silicon Valley spread the popular gospel that anyone with a notion, a small amount of cash, and a thimble-full of gumption could play the game of turbo-capitalism and eventually amass a personal fortune. By 1999, the *New York Times* noted that millions of Americans were focusing "on the one thing that most define[d] their lives, the upward and downward ticks of interest rates, the gyrations of their mutual funds, the achingly palpable lure and temptations of wealth."<sup>12</sup> By 2001, the Federal Reserve determined that 52 percent of the nation's citizens had some form of stock ownership. Among registered voters, shareholders outnumbered those not in the market 53 percent to 43 percent.<sup>13</sup>

The respective decisions that average citizens made to join the equity-owning class had tangible benefits. Indeed, the typical American's stock portfolio enjoyed healthy gains during the 1990s, rising in value from \$10,800 in 1989 to \$25,000 in 1998. Stock holdings across a broader base of American households helped send the net worth per family from \$59,700 in 1989 to \$71,600 in 1998.<sup>14</sup> More important than any particular quantitative tabulation of relative prosperity, however, was the sheer belief in the popular mind that the Internet would be the apocalyptic battering ram that would finally demolish the barricades separating everyday people from the gilded bastions of the controlling classes. No group figured as prominently on the frontlines of the New Economy's populist assault on the old monetary order as American youth.

When the 1990s began, the most pressing domestic concern was how to reckon with the fact that "for the first time in American history" a generation

of young people (Generation X) would not be as wealthy as their parents. This creeping sense of socioeconomic stagnation created a loss of purpose in the psychic life of the nation and paved the way for the election of Bill Clinton in the decade's first presidential election. However, thanks to the Internet, by the decade's close, American youth were no longer seen as economic dropouts and perennial underachievers but as technological wizards, market innovators, social visionaries, and increasingly at the financial vanguard of their ostensibly parent-led households. During the dot-com boom, the press repeatedly proclaimed the arrival of a new class of precocious teens called "The Enfatpreneurs."<sup>15</sup> Individual members of this new demographic—emboldened by the rhetorical rallying cry "Who Needs a Diploma?"<sup>16</sup>—boldly stepped into suburban living rooms across America with freshly minted dot-com business plans in hand and proudly declared to their submissive, tech-ignorant, and somewhat awed parents: "... I'm the boss now."<sup>17</sup>

Some of the hoopla over money's more youthful visage in the Internet Age was upheld by statistical data. According to a survey conducted by the Hartford, CT-based Phoenix Home Life Mutual Insurance Company, for example, the number of U.S. households with a net worth of \$1 million grew to 6.7 million in 1998, up from 1.8 million in 1990. The survey also found that in 1998, 45 percent of the country's millionaires were younger than 55, 80 percent of them first-generation millionaires.<sup>18</sup> the *New York Times* reported similar findings, telling readers in a March 2000 article that "5 of every 100 people in the top 1 percent of the wealthiest Americans are 35 years or younger, compared with a fraction of a percent just 17 years ago."<sup>19</sup> This explosive trend in the creation of new wealth—fueled by a speculative mania for dot-com companies on Wall Street—led many to believe that the Internet had indeed changed everything and that a radical new social order was coming into view. Thus, the emergence of the hip-hop mogul class of entertainment executives only seemed to further delineate and reinforce a broader socioeconomic rupture of seismic proportions.

Echoing Chancellor's observation on the carnivalesque aspects of financial speculation, John Seabrook uses the word *Nobrow* to define the historically specific cultural milieu from within which hip-hop moguls emerged in the late 1990s.<sup>20</sup> For Seabrook, Nobrow signals a new synergy between marketing and creativity that gives the judgments and tastes of the masses more influence in cultural affairs than traditional social elites. In Seabrook's estimation, this trend is epitomized best by an inversion of influence whereby purveyors of hypercommercial multiculturalism, such as MTV, have usurped the fortunes of once sacrosanct cultural filters such as the *New Yorker*. Stanford legal historian Lawrence M. Friedman ascribes this global cultural movement to the ability of information

technology to accelerate social change and to the ways in which frameworks of social governance are revised accordingly.<sup>21</sup> Nobrow crystallizes these shifting times by identifying how the commercialization of artistic creativity—guided always by the invisible hand of an increasingly consolidated electronic and digital media oligarchy—has set once-fixed assumptions about the nature of cultural value into motion. These conditions of rapid historical change have created new opportunities for everyday people to accumulate the continually emergent forms of cultural capital that can be most easily exchanged for social status in the marketplace of ideas. Culture, in Seabrook's estimation, is now equivalent to a deregulated economy of signs defined by endless flux and reconfiguration, within which modern individuals can affiliate with ideas, experiences, and social groups across local, regional, and national borders in quicksilver fashion. In this vein, social identity becomes the functional equivalent of a "mosh pit" wherein speculative personal investments are constantly allocated and repositioned in a market of contingent cultural values and forms.

Sociologists use the concept of status to explain how everyday acts and perceptions construct a hierarchy of relative social positions. Individuals' locations within that hierarchy shape others' expectations of and actions toward them and thereby determine the opportunities and constraints that they confront. Under the rubric of Nobrow, social status is not the static by-product of one's birthright, but rather the dynamic coupling of charisma—what rappers and athletes call "swagger"—with tactical engagement in the consumer marketplace. The incessant competition for differentiation and distinction, described famously by the French sociologist Pierre Bordieu, still abides, but no longer according to the old cultural rules.<sup>22</sup> The Nobrow metaphor helps identify, therefore, how hip-hop has politicized taste within the cultural field by bringing to the market forms of underground social knowledge that can be exchanged and circulated like economic resources. Quite appropriately, when Jay-Z describes himself as "[t]he Martha Stewart, that's far from Jewish/Far from a Harvard student, just had the balls to do it" on the song "What More Can I Say" from his celebrated *Black Album*,<sup>23</sup> he succinctly summarizes the hip-hop mogul's capacity to shape mainstream taste by leveraging nothing more than large reserves of self-confidence and a willingness to take the initiative.

Indeed, through the boundary-defying powers of the electronic and digital media, socially isolated territories of disreputable cultural knowledge, such as America's inner cities, have become essential to dominant modes of social identity-formation.<sup>24</sup> This unlikely symbolic reversal has been progressive to the extent that, like the ritualized state of disorder in Renaissance carnival, it has shattered the old high-low cultural hierarchy predicated upon "good

breeding,” “proper schooling,” and “aesthetic appreciation,” having instead placed the market’s consumptive ethos of equal opportunity at the center of the individual’s protean capacity for self-definition. However, this trend also threatens to make the great twentieth-century sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” paradigm for black civic enfranchisement and communal development seem quaint, if not utterly irrelevant.<sup>25</sup> In Du Bois’s day, taste, status, and eligibility for social leadership were all predicated upon incontrovertible ideas of truth and knowledge that were to be gleaned from passage through a range of civic institutions, most notably the black colleges and universities that had been founded in the hopeful days of Reconstruction. The standards of judgment accrued during this intellectual and spiritual training regimen represented “blue chip” standards of personal equity. This elitist trajectory of achievement formed the basis of the cultural catholicity that Du Bois formulated as a remedy for the gloomy condition of perpetual indebtedness that the sharecropping system virtually preordained for black freedmen. The seductive mass mediation of Nobrow hegemony, however, has increasingly motivated American cultural consumers to legitimize themselves largely without the imprimatur of traditional knowledge-bearing institutions. As exemplary signs of the New Economy’s ability to promote categorical dissolution,<sup>26</sup> many black cultural practitioners—especially those within hip-hop—became widely known as unlikely but ultimately legitimate representatives of late-1990s prosperity, privy to a Shangri-la of mushrooming capital gains and seemingly endless liquidity.

Thus, whether within speculative manias of financial or cultural variety, a reordering of the social hierarchy takes place. Depending on one’s standing in the pecking order, such a circumstance may not be such an unfortunate turn of events. A brief passage from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* captures the timeless allure of this proposition while also illustrating how race supplements the specifically American notion of speculative symbolic reversal. In it, the reader enters the reverie of the book’s narrator, Nick Carraway, as he rides toward the island of Manhattan, the epicenter of carnivalesque possibility during the Jazz Age:

Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world . . . As we crossed Blackwell’s Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffer, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry. ‘Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,’ I thought; ‘anything at all . . .’<sup>27</sup>

The surge of wealth creation on Wall Street during the 1990s New Economy offered everyday people a similar opportunity for protean self-redefinition as hip-hop moguls became racial icons for the bull market's democratic promise of structural inversion.

As perhaps Nobrow's supreme symbolic idiom, hip-hop shifted during the 1990s from being antithetical to the cultivation of aesthetic disposition and leisure preference in mainstream commercial channels to serving as one of the most profitable means toward that end.<sup>28</sup> Though still dogged by intermittent outbreaks of moral panic<sup>29</sup> from mainstream society, hip-hop culture gradually became known as just one innovation among the many that the dot-com economy had wrought, and therefore a more tolerable presence in the United States' millennial celebration of prolonged economic growth. In an article on the hip-hop mogul phenomenon, Tania Padgett conflates post-industrial innovation and cultural marketing in a particularly apt manner, noting how "in the '80s, it was the leveraged buy-out; in the '90s, technology. But at the beginning of a new century, it's the selling of 'cool' that is building empires and making moguls . . . millions with what is surely the coolest widget around: hip-hop."<sup>30</sup> This robust market muscle is the function of the new synergy between black cultural producers, white youth, commercial media, and the mainstream consumer market. In previous historical eras, black cultural expression from the bottom of the social hierarchy, and the standards of moral value that they conveyed, functioned as the cultural equivalent of what Harvard Business School professor Clay Christensen calls "disruptive technologies."<sup>31</sup> In this respect, prior to the hip-hop mogul's arrival on the scene, middle managers in most mainstream marketing organizations had only intermittently regarded rap as a cultural sensibility worth embracing. Even many black record company executives did not consider hip-hop a sustainable cultural trend in the idiom's early days.<sup>32</sup> As the 1990s lapsed into the twenty-first century, however, black cultural tastes—especially those stemming from the aspirations and lifestyles fundamental to hip-hop's worldview—became extremely efficient devices for extracting profit from the consumptive habits of America's youth across a broad spectrum of product verticals, from apparel to mobile telephony.

Herein we find the hip-hop mogul's primary business imperative: namely, the effective identification, packaging, and marketing of the politically and socially volatile minority underclass's expressive culture. On a certain level, the use of urban variations on signs of blackness as a wedge for greater market share is nothing new. After all, channeling the experiential abundance of America's multicultural masses into commodity form has been part of the historical project for America's barons of leisure since the days when minstrel sheet music extolled the nefarious exploits of Zip Coon.<sup>33</sup> This endeavor has traditionally employed art and performance to



transcend the boundaries of social stratification and enable new modes of interracial and interethnic recombination—no matter how circumscribed and degraded such contact may inevitably have been. What *was* unprecedented in the 1990s, however, was the degree to which the hip-hop mogul's growing importance installed young black men at the helm of America's pop market logic toward social diversity—and gave them an owner's stake in the multimedia bonanza surrounding its circulation. Henry Louis Gates Jr. noted of the new black creative gatekeepers that “for the first time, we have a significant presence of black agents, black editors, [and] black reviewers. Blacks now run and own record labels. . . . With the active recruitment of minorities into the mainstream, blacks have an institutional authority without precedent in American cultural history.”<sup>34</sup> With this new influence came a veritable explosion of urban cultural offerings throughout the commercial landscape, spearheaded by the strong growth in rap music sales. In 2000, for example, “the Recording Industry Association of America [estimated] that rap music generated more than \$1.8 billion in sales, accounting for 12.9 percent of all music purchases . . . surpass[ing] country music as the nation's second most popular genre after rock and roll.”<sup>35</sup> These figures have since softened considerably, mirroring the fundamental deterioration of profit margins in the music industry as a whole, but the fact remains that in the late 1990s hip-hop culture unquestionably solidified itself as a key rampart of the national structure of feeling.<sup>36</sup>

Hip-hop's burgeoning cultural and financial influence enabled the black cultural producers who best embodied mastery of speculation's inherent risks to join the ranks of the corporate celebrity class. Two hip-hop entrepreneurs, Percy Miller and Sean Combs, were listed squarely in the middle of *Fortune* magazine's roster of “America's Forty Richest under 40” at the time. Master P sat directly behind Vinny Smith, chairman and CEO of Quest Software, with a net worth of \$293.8 million; Diddy, whose personal fortune came in at a cool \$293.7 million, ranked ahead of such luminaries as actress Julia Roberts, the golf wunderkind Tiger Woods, and a slew of technology and software tycoons.<sup>37</sup>

As the 1990s wound to a close, hip-hop's centrality within Nobrow hegemony became more iron-clad than ever. In keeping with the emergence of the new cultural common sense, *Time* defined the last days of the twentieth century as “the age of hip-hop.”<sup>38</sup> Given the prevailing contours of the zeitgeist, it was not altogether surprising to see the hip-hop impresario Sean Combs headlining the Metropolitan Museum of Art's annual Costume Institute gala mere weeks before the arrival of Y2K. This was a Nobrow cultural moment par excellence: Within one of the more formidable citadels of Western civilization, and at an end-of-the-century celebration cochaired by *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour and attended by such disparate luminaries as comedian Jerry Seinfeld, billionaire buyout kingpin Ronald Perelman, film

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producer Harvey Weinstein, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, actress Gwyneth Paltrow, and socialites Patricia Buckley, Nan Kempner, and Alexandra von Furstenberg, rap, the gruff baritone voice of the ghetto, was anointed as the most appropriate musical keynote with which to “ring out the old and ring in the new.”<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, the mainstream media seemed most keen to observe how aptly hip-hop moguls’ spending habits reflected the excesses of the times. Time and again, across a wide range of publications, hip-hop’s culture of bling was proclaimed as the hallmark of a self-indulgent decade. Fashion columnist Amy Spindler wrote in the *New York Times*, for instance, that when historians recalled the stylish excesses of the Internet gold rush, they would do so in terms of how hip-hop served as a consumptive bellwether for the champagne and caviar set. “Silicon geeks and dot-comers may earn triple-digit billions,” Spindler noted, “but the folks who *really* have the knack for spending—the true nouveau riche, our Carringtons of the new Millennium—are hip-hop impresarios like Puffy Combs.”<sup>40</sup> And what sort of bounty did Spindler conflate with Combs’s mogul lifestyle? How about the following: a sable vest from Fendi (\$18,500), silver stilettos from the red-hot designer Jimmy Choo (\$650 a pair), an 18-karat gold Tiffany necklace and matching bracelet, both decked out in diamonds (\$33,500 and \$27,000, respectively), a bottle of Burgundy at Alain Ducasse’s new restaurant at the Essex House on Central Park South (\$800), a pound of Crème de la Mer facial lotion designed to spec for NASA (\$1,000), and title to the ninetieth-floor penthouse at Trump World Tower at United Nations Plaza (\$38 million). It’s important to recollect that during the 1990s bull market the spendthrift ways of the wealthiest rappers were hardly socially aberrant. Throughout the long boom, many Americans had their personal fortunes lofted in the updraft of the speculative winning streak, and they rewarded themselves by spending relatively extravagantly in their own right. Indeed, the major symbolic figures of that halcyon age, from celebrity CEOs and upstart technology entrepreneurs to magazine publishers and publicity mavens, were known for spending lavishly to promote their goods, their services, and themselves. Consequently, hip-hop’s “wealth effect” spending patterns became inserted rather easily within the New Economy’s dominant social and cultural constellation.

The legitimate longing for freedom and equality within such paroxysms of “irrational exuberance” aside, Edward Chancellor’s financial history reminds us that “periods of carnival and speculative mania end” and that the latter typically see figureheads of excess “pilloried, stripped of their wealth, and imprisoned.”<sup>41</sup> Quite predictably, the dot-com bubble slouched toward posterity amid an intense moral backlash that targeted the New Economy’s privileged class, particularly the CEOs, investment bankers, and equity research analysts who appeared to service their greed during the

golden years by bilking the masses with phony information. Curiously, despite this call for reformation and redress, the entertainment sector where the hip-hop moguls were ensconced continued to thrive as what one columnist in the *New York Times* called the last “safe haven for ridiculous expenditure.”<sup>42</sup> When one considers the enduring good fortune of the mogul cohort, it is well worth noting that unlike many of the corporate icons of Web 1.0, the deflation of the Internet equity bubble did not spell the demise of hip-hop’s market for “cool.” In addition, figures such as Shawn Carter and Damon Dash escaped the jeremiads against the “fabulous life” of greed and excess that brought the dot-com era to a close because their wealth and consumptive practices were viewed as legitimate products of a strenuous striving to succeed, and representative therefore of an unexpected—almost divinely ordained—social mobility that arose against the grain of public expectation. Generally speaking, social mobility defines the degree to which, in a given society, an individual’s social status may change throughout the course of his or her lifetime, much as the hallowed myth of the American Dream suggests that an individual can move from poverty to wealth in one generation. In rap’s typical bling narrative “it goes without saying that the squandering protagonist is a rags-to-riches figure who beat overwhelming odds and has every right to the fruits of that success.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, unlike publicly traded companies that have an obligation to serve the material interests of their shareholders, the type of investments that rap moguls need to make to redeem themselves with their consuming public are almost entirely psychic in nature. Accordingly, the rap moguls’ primary duty and obligation is to reinvent themselves as the incarnation of their customers’ collective dream for a more abundant life, something radically different from the template of propriety and accountability under which CEOs of publicly traded firms must operate. In the late 1990s, this meant that even as many celebrity CEOs were publicly humiliated for their fiscal imprudence, whether for crimes symbolic or real, rap moguls generally came away from the dot-com collapse unscathed. As the *New York Times* quipped, “Sean Combs was once accused of hitting a record executive with a chair and a Champagne bottle, but at least he has never smacked your 401(k) around.”<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, politically speaking, hip-hop moguls remain charged cultural figures precisely because of their ability to appeal to various interpretive communities, each possessing very specific stakes vis-à-vis the moguls’ rise to economic power and cultural influence. Therefore, even though moguls may not have been directly implicated by mainstream commentators in the dot-com meltdown, in black America their flashy lifestyles were alleged to exemplify a troubling generational shift between the civil rights and hip-hop generations over the market’s role as a meaningful referent and basis for the activist-oriented black public sphere.<sup>45</sup> The civil rights

political establishment's puritanical restraint regarding commodity consumption stands in contradistinction to the opportunistic demeanor of the hip-hop moguls, who recognized that progressive aspirations can be bought and sold—and the higher the price the better.<sup>46</sup> For many of rap's more populist artists and fans, the emergence of the hip-hop mogul as a visual signifier for the "good life" identified neoliberal forms of social uplift as the "new normal" within black political discourse.

Neoliberalism contends that the best path to social progress runs through the free market. Accordingly, neoliberal political economy strives to intensify and expand market transactions. From the neoliberal perspective, every human being is an entrepreneur managing his or her own life and should act as such. Neoliberals also believe that society and the state should not have fixed goals but should evolve purely through market-based competition; those who do not or cannot participate in the market have failed in some way.<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, in neoliberal political economy, "risk" represented as potential dangers to be collectively managed is increasingly replaced by "risk" represented as opportunity or reward for individuals."<sup>48</sup> Nobel-winning economist Amartya Sen frames debates over neoliberalism in terms of an intellectual dividing line between growth-mediated strategies for social progress and support-led communal development. Sen says that a classic support-led initiative "does not operate through fast economic growth, but works through a program of skillful social support of health care, education and other relevant social arrangements." Sen defines growth-mediated development as "working through fast economic growth [with] its success [depending] on the growth process being wide-based and economically broad . . . and . . . utilization of the enhanced economic prosperity to expand the relevant social services, including health care, education, and social security."<sup>49</sup> Tellingly, it is this second part of the growth-mediated equation that neoliberal regimes typically leave out. Indeed, Jay-Z's lyrical argument that "I can't help the poor if I'm one of them/So I got rich and gave back/To me that's the win, win"<sup>50</sup> does not fully convince many fans and critics alike that the hip-hop mogul's ability to represent opulence and aspiration actually enables new modes of development and freedom for communities wherein such enhancements would mean quite a lot.

What is certain is that the representational frameworks depicting rap's upwardly mobile motifs generally have to do with identity-shifting, or, at least, identity "layering." In other words, although rappers—whether moguls or otherwise—never deny their racial and ethnic heritage, they fuse their identities with ethnic and racial others, fashioning odd juxtapositions to symbolically expand the options for social mobility normally afforded blacks and Latinos in postmodern capitalist society.<sup>51</sup> When it comes to riffing on mainstream corporate culture, this means that auditors

can frequently hear MCs describe themselves as the “Black Bill Gates,” the “Black Warren Buffett,” or the “Black [Donald] Trump” as a means of establishing the grandiose level of their riches and the extensive reach of their social fluidity. Similarly, MCs in the later 1990s frequently deployed the trope of ethnic Mafiosi in their lyrical constructions to metaphorically escape the limited place afforded minority men of color in American society. Through the gangster motifs of narcotics, fast cars, fast women, fancy clothing, strong liquor, and a “never say die” attitude, rappers sought to gain greater symbolic fluidity and transcend what Manthia Diawara has called the constraint of racial immanence that hems black people within the immutable realm of the stereotype.<sup>52</sup>

Rappers who exploited the latitude of such lyrical constructions to proliferate new images of urban blackness were described by critics as having converted black identity into the dematerialized cultural equivalent of a financial derivative<sup>53</sup> and subsequently weathered punitive reactions from rival artists and crews within the hip-hop community. For example, in the summer of 1996, at the dawn of mogul representational hegemony, the group De La Soul used its single “Itzoweezee,” from the album *Stakes is High*, to admonish MCs fixated on Mafia-inspired self-portrayals. In one line, the group scolds “pawns of the industry” that “Cubans don’t care what y’all niggas do/Colombians ain’t never ran with your crew.” In another verse, the group pulls back the veneer of the aggrandizement within mafioso reiterations by joking with a hyperconsumptive MC that “the only Italians you know are Ices.”<sup>54</sup> The most vocal critics of the moguls’ representational strategies were a cadre of rappers who, in the tradition of Hebrew spiritual reformers, appointed themselves as prophetic pedagogues, street-level intellectuals, and storefront theologians committed to leading black youth away from what W. E. B. Du Bois called a “Gospel of Pay” through lyrical constructions that urged auditors to undertake a spiritual conversion. Manthia Diawara says that by definition, conversionist rhetoric deploys

[n]arratives about the worst sinners to justify the need for transformation . . . whether politicians or religious leaders, [conversionists] build their audiences by blaming the culture of the people that they are trying to convert. They always expect people to achieve a revolutionary consciousness or a spiritual awakening and walk out of their culture, shedding it like a shell or a cracked skin, in order to change the world.<sup>55</sup>

By heeding the rap conversionist’s words, black youth would be able to discover the “Truth” of their condition within the neoliberal order and initiate a multipronged campaign for communal revitalization.

To gird the rank and file at the vanguard of spiritual battle, rap conversionists crafted lyrics that fashioned a seductive blend of Afrocentricity, quasi-Islamic invective, and monitories that advocated the rejection of Euro-derived forms of material culture, the appetite for which the prophet regarded as the source of black spiritual disorientation. For instance, at the beginning of a song called “Ital (Universal Side)” from their album *illadelp halflife*, Black Thought from the Roots and Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest identify the politically debilitating generation gap within black America, the anti-intellectual “code of the streets” afflicting its youth, and the apocalyptic infernos of moral collapse looming in the nation’s not-too-distant future.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the song, Q-Tip and Black Thought use their rhymes to identify structural and behavioral impediments to the ghetto’s spiritual and material rehabilitation. The Roots also used their music video to the single “What They Do,” from the *illadelp halflife* album, as a critique of the Moët-drinking, fast-living lifestyle epitomized by such rappers as Jay-Z and Combs. In 1998, Lauryn Hill, then a leading prophetic voice within rap, released a song called “Final Hour,” which implores auditors to find a middle road between capital accumulation and spiritual renewal, offering her own spiritual odyssey and successful musical career as a template for ethical action. As the song’s title alludes, Hill’s ultimate message concerns the ways that excessive preoccupation with capitalist materialism, as well as blatant disregard for social inequality, distracts mankind’s attention from the inevitable Day of Judgment. Hill presented herself as a sage, a street-savvy prophet who had come to educate her audience about saving their souls. As she explained succinctly: “I’m about to change the focus/From the richest to the brokest.”<sup>57</sup> In 1999, a song by Mos Def called “Fear Not of Man” offers another celebrated example of rap prophecy.<sup>58</sup> In the song’s spoken word prelude, Mos Def calls his auditors to order with a quick Islamic chant before broadening his invitation to listen to everyone within earshot, or, as he puts it, “All the continent, Europe, all abroad, international.” During his ensuing lyrical bars and measures, Mos Def calls for every individual within hip-hop’s global community to reevaluate their personal worth according to metrics not endorsed by the idolatrous conventions of late twentieth-century life, especially the pagan belief that technology could replicate the omnipotence of the Almighty.

Rap conversionists joined the dissenting voices of other social critics who argued in the late 1990s that the New Economy’s intertwined narratives of progress, prosperity, and social cohesion had depended upon the spread of Western capitalism abroad and the legislation of widespread surveillance, incarceration, and social control at home. This vocal opposition argued that despite the hoopla attending the record period of economic growth in the United States, for far too many folks, the boom in the domestic economy sanctioned by globalization had proved to be a bust—resulting in

assaults on a wide range of social welfare systems, the resurgence of blame-the-victim explanations for poverty, racism in the name of color blindness, the erosion of democracy, and systematic violations of human rights. Taken as a single element in this broader social discourse, hip-hop's antimogul backlash represented further attempts within the black community to negotiate the competing interests between market-led initiatives and traditional constructions of African American communal safe havens. As an alternative to the more dire forms of rap eschatology and prophetic belief,<sup>59</sup> rap moguls proposed that the vision of mass black opposition to capitalism was no longer tenable and, while not letting white America, the financial power structure, and the police state completely off the hook for their oppressive tendencies, insisted that the abiding goal should be for black individuals to make the most of present conditions however they could.

In a certain sense, the word *nigga* increasingly gained cachet in rap circles throughout the 1990s as the quintessential expletive that inner-city black men used to signify both comradeship and rivalry with those who made a whole way of life from the loud gestures that tried to preempt and short-circuit the disciplinary mechanisms that society deployed to thwart their struggle for broader social mobility and enhanced self-esteem.<sup>60</sup> "Niggas" were continually idealized in rap poetics as those men continually willing to take the heat for their brazen social pageantry and able to pay the ultimate price to escape the abject locales to which they had been relegated. According to rap's "bad man" mythology,<sup>61</sup> if the nigga lived long enough to realize recompense for his initiative and was savvy enough to leverage his gains within and against his immediate surroundings, then he could graduate from relative obscurity and move up to the more elevated plane occupied by the moguls and their handpicked superstars. When this happened, he could join the esteemed ranks of men such as Curtis James "50 Cent" Jackson, who had made a similar ascent up from the anonymity of the street corner.<sup>62</sup> Tellingly, even as niggas were jousting to establish their self-worth and prove themselves in a hostile environment, moguls possessed the sense of entitlement required to begin speculating on the value of the surrounding world.

Given that black disenfranchisement has been predicated upon making black people the objects rather than the subjects of capitalist speculation, even critics noted that there was much to be said for the mogul's display of nerve.<sup>63</sup> In fact, it is this gumption that still makes moguls worthy of celebrity status and mass mediation. However, in a regressive manner, moguls achieved their version of utopia via social isolation from, and antagonism toward, less successful ghetto residents—even as they claimed, paradoxically, to represent and inspire their aspirations for greater glory. Whether or not they portrayed themselves as gangsters, above all else, the

mogul calibrated the distance between the lowly member of the *hoi polloi* that he once was and the elite persona to which he could lay claim via recourse to money, jewels, automobiles, VIP parties, exotic travel, and an abundance of willing sexual partners.<sup>64</sup> In short, the mogul stood out as “a self-made aristocrat, a former member of the underclass [who’d] raised himself up from its ranks and seized his chance to ‘shine.’”<sup>65</sup> Because of his largesse, the mogul loomed large as an elect member of the ghetto community and regarded himself as an activist of sorts, an example to others of what they could make of their lives if they would simply seize the right opportunity when the time came. For the rap mogul, in true neoliberal fashion, success for individual strivers in the hip-hop nation was as simple as learning how to “Do, You!”<sup>66</sup>

Like all neoliberals, moguls despise government regulation and attempts to nullify asymmetrical outcomes of individual achievement via social engineering, the chief difference being that rappers frequently couch neoliberal dogma in colloquial terms befitting their derring-do in the risk-laden underworld of crack cocaine.<sup>67</sup> As moguls go about making their case for greater liberty, they may lament the plight of the black masses and may simulate reference to these constituencies in the name of authenticity, but they don’t sacrifice their own quest for the American good life on others’ behalf. Rather, the mogul’s vision of gilded glory is as socially-competitive and exclusive as it is opulent. As the prototypical mogul anthem “Hate Me Now” attests, moguls and their talented minions flaunt their rise from among the ranks of the downtrodden by making public displays of their newly acquired wealth.<sup>68</sup> For moguls, jealousy, envy, and hatred from onlookers are merely rites of passage; to be the object of such “hatred” merely serves to crystallize their essential charisma and mark them as among God’s chosen few. As self-made people, moguls are not inclined to wait around for social intervention but spot available opportunities for material advancement and seize them as best they can. They simply want people to get out of their way and let them handle their business. When those whom they have left behind betray their envy and become “playahaters,” that simply lets moguls know that they have done the “right thing,” further reinforcing their solipsistic moral code.<sup>69</sup>

Combs, for example, who made a cameo appearance on Nas’s “Hate Me Now,” released a song of his own called “P.E. 2000,” in which he sulked about what a dreary life being a well-connected multimillionaire by the age of thirty had turned out to be. Like the tragic bewilderment of Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, whose childlike faith in wealth’s ability to beget unconditional adoration from those around him shattered upon the shoals of an unyielding adulthood, Combs’s “P.E. 2000” was a classic capitalist lament penned by a frustrated yet doggedly optimistic dreamer. Like most mogul figures, Combs suggested that his protestation be understood as a spur to the



motivations of others. The mobilization Combs sought to incite was completely different, however, from the mobilization in previous moments in rap's history. As the *New York Times* reported at the time,

"P.E. 2000," a remake of Public Enemy's 1987 classic "Public Enemy No. 1" . . . replaces the original's political militancy with [Combs's] trademark blend of self-aggrandizement and self-pity. Where "Public Enemy No. 1" spoke for the man on the street, "P.E. 2000" invites rap fans to identify with the man cruising in the silver Bentley and brooding over the astonishing fact that money and power do not inevitably bring peace of mind."<sup>70</sup>

This form of spiteful self-absorption that poses as neighborliness is typically at the root of all capitalist-derived notions of community and is deemed to be one of the more regrettable elements of the postwar consumptive consensus that has infiltrated the ghetto's childhood dream of what it wants to be when it grows up. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* article noted that despite the relative tedium of the mogul's message, "rap fans continue[d] to find vicarious enjoyment in the . . . fantasy, in which being hated is the inevitable price for being one of the few who makes it in a world that otherwise guarantees anonymity and poverty for most."<sup>71</sup> Again, in this respect, the most economically privileged rappers were completely in sync with the mainstream attitude and outlook. During the late 1990s, the prevailing social obsession with relative social position meant that among the privileged, often there was "not a thought given to public service."<sup>72</sup> Anyone who dissented from this new consensus regarding the desirability of material excess became labeled as a "lifestyle scold" and a whining member of "The Indulgence Police."<sup>73</sup> People were told not to worry about widening socioeconomic outcomes but rather to rejoice in the fact that America guaranteed equal opportunity. Indeed, it became an open question by decade's close as to whether inequality even mattered at all.

Still, symbolically speaking, moguls should not be understood solely as figures of ideological alienation, for they can never be too discursively disconnected from the spectacle of the black masses; it is the volatile energy of the crowd that gives them creative impulses to channel, package, and sell. In this respect, moguls are figures who attain celebrity through their mastery of what has been called the ghetto sublime.<sup>74</sup> In other words, they can grant audiences thrilling proximity to a form of social danger of truly epic proportions while simultaneously providing safe remove from the object of collective fascination. Moguls, therefore, are intrepid prospectors for underground creative expression whose daring enables them to extract valuable jewels from the yawning ghetto maw for the benefit of broader society—their efforts simultaneously registering inclusion within

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and resistance toward mainstream capitalism.<sup>75</sup> There is always a political dimension to moguls' balancing acts as regards the symbolic multitudes of everyday folk. Hip-hop culture, whether under the auspices of moguls or not, always needs periodically to resurrect the black masses as the foundational thematic element from its own hallowed past. Indeed, if moguls cannot claim to understand the volatile energies of the street and possess the eminent capacity to tap them, they will cease to exist as viable figures of commercial and cultural enterprise. In this regard, moguls are the epitome of utopian double consciousness as regards the masses.

[The mogul] is the man of the crowd: at once immanent and transcendent, at once an insider and an outsider, at once everyman and the exceptional individual who provides the masses with a singular identity, a singular face, a mirror image of a sovereign collectivity that is now always in motion. . . . Fully swept up in the multicolored and polyphonic waves of modern revolution, he is able to channel their tidal fury towards higher and nobler ends: national sovereignty, liberty, empire, progress.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, for all of his upwardly mobile pretensions, hip-hop moguls need the spectacle of the more impoverished masses, for they give them the raw material, the literal human canvas, for and upon which their ascent can be made emblematic.

Yet, socioeconomic trends suggest that it may be more difficult for moguls to achieve this structural balance. Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that the radical divergence of life chances for the affluent and the poor represents one of the more perplexing and troubling phenomena within contemporary black American experience.<sup>77</sup> During the prosperous 1990s, the black upper-middle class developed rapidly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1988, a little over 220,000 black households earned at least \$100,000 per year. By 1998, that figure had almost doubled to slightly over 414,000 households.<sup>78</sup> Unfortunately, the inordinate numbers of blacks warehoused in the nation's prisons made the otherwise bright interpretation of the New Economy's "tight labor market" much cloudier. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on the contradictions:

The strong economy has pushed U.S. joblessness to the lowest levels in three decades. But a grim factor is also helping the numbers: a record 1.7 million people are currently imprisoned in the U.S. Prisoners are excluded from unemployment calculations. And since most inmates are economically disadvantaged and unskilled, jailing so many people has effectively taken a big block of the nation's least-employable citizens out of the equation. The proportion of the

population behind bars has doubled since 1985, note labor economists Lawrence Katz and Alan Kreuger. If the incarceration rate had held steady over that period, they suggest, the current 4.1% unemployment rate would be a less-robust 4.3%. And because minorities are jailed at a much higher rate, black unemployment—currently a historically low 7.9%—would likely be as high as 9.4%, says Harvard's Dr. Katz.<sup>79</sup>

Presumably, the numbers that the economists uncovered would have been even higher for black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five—the prime constituency for hip-hop's "nation within the nation." Black women increasingly became part of the New Economy's prison industrial complex, as well.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, a raft of recent academic studies demonstrate that since the 1990s, the prospects for the black disadvantaged—particularly for young black men—have worsened.<sup>81</sup>

Figures also reveal that aggregate gains in household wealth during the late 1990s masked growing discrepancies between white and black households. Indeed, statistics indicate that although the median net worth of whites rose seventeen percent in 2001 to \$120,900, it fell by 4.5 percent, to \$17,000, for minorities. The underparticipation of African Americans in equity ownership seemed to at least partially explain the durability and increase in the wealth gap. Surveys revealed that even at the height of dot-com mania, the majority of African Americans did not enlist in the emerging class of "citizen capitalists." A survey conducted in 2000, for example, found that blacks accounted "for just 5% of stock investors."<sup>82</sup>

The explosive economic growth of Dot.com era also did not make the nation less segregated. In fact, the *Financial Times* recounted that

[r]esults of the 2000 US census indicate neighborhoods are still surprisingly segregated by race. Although Hispanics and Asians have increasingly integrated with the rest of society, blacks and whites still tend to go their separate ways. In a recent analysis of 2000 US Census data, the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany showed the typical white person living near a metropolitan centre is in a neighborhood that is 80 percent white and just 7 percent black. A typical African-American lives in an area that is 33 percent white and 51 percent black. The numbers have barely changed from a decade ago—the last time the census was taken.<sup>83</sup>

Disturbingly, the aforementioned figures suggest that despite the widespread mythology of industrious individualism, and despite the average American's very real ambitions for monetary wealth—and despite the explosion of new millionaires during the decade—the fruits of prosperity

during the 1990s were even more heavily skewed toward the already rich than they had been in prior booms. By the decade's close, the richest 1 percent of the nation held 35 percent of the nation's wealth. Yet the top five percent of households in 1998—those making \$132,199 or more—held just over 21 percent of all income. In 1967, this group represented only 17.5 percent of the national income pie.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, "like the diversity myth, America clings to a 'mobility myth' that states that as long as one works hard and has the good luck that follows being prepared, one will always be on an upwardly mobile track."<sup>85</sup> Because of this belief that the poor always get richer from one generation to the next, America continues to largely ignore widening wealth and income inequality. It seems likely that this ideological bent helps enable such minority celebrity figures as the hip-hop moguls to assume such grand representational proportions by simulating communal wealth in the guise of individual achievement.

From one historical era to the next, lack of financial aptitude continually hampers the efforts of young American minorities to share in the nation's economic good fortune when capital investment cycles turn favorable. As former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan argued soon after the dot-com bubble's collapse, "improving basic financial education . . . is essential to help young people avoid poor financial decisions that can take years to overcome."<sup>86</sup> Efforts to use the allure of celebrity figures such as hip-hop moguls for such pedagogical imperatives are increasingly being explored and pursued. For example, the record label magnate Russell Simmons and longtime Civil Rights activist Dr. Benjamin Chavis have formed the Get Your Money Right Hip-Hop Summit on Financial Empowerment, which travels to urban centers across North America with one overarching theme: teaching financial literacy to at-risk youth. At each Get Your Money Right event, rappers and black financial professionals deliver lessons in personal banking, vehicle financing, repairing bad credit, understanding credit scores, and learning basic savings techniques. In the United States, where the Get Your Money Right tour originated, an estimated twelve million households do not have bank accounts—a demographic called the "unbanked" by the financial industry. Empowerment campaigns such as Get Your Money Right and Sean Combs's Vote or Die! voter registration initiative build upon recent attempts by black leadership, as in Jesse Jackson's Wall Street Project, to consider growth-mediated and celebrity-driven approaches to communal development. These projects defy the conventional wisdom of the left-wing political establishment, which is typically slow to consider growth-mediated paths out of disenfranchisement for black Americans,<sup>87</sup> and have taken on even greater urgency in the wake of the harrowing human tragedy suffered by the black poor in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

At the very least, the ascension of the hip-hop mogul has gone a long way toward opening up space in working-class and poor minority communities in which to view mainstream corporate enterprise with more than absolute suspicion and disdain. These openings may enable emergent progressive coalitions to advance their social empowerment agendas without being hamstrung by the class-based friction that has typically plagued the hip-hop generation from within.<sup>88</sup> Charting how this process takes shape in the new millennium will provide much insight on the evolution of black political struggle as well as the nation's general orientation toward shaping a more inclusive form of economic democracy.

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## The Roots and Aesthetic Foundation of Hip-hop Culture

*Cheryl L. Keyes*

Hip-hop can be defined as a youth arts mass cultural movement that evolved in New York City during the 1970s. Hip-hop is identified by its four elements—breakdancing (b-boy/b-girl), graffiti (writers), disc jockeying (DJing) and emceeing (MCing)—and is expressed by its adherents as language, gestures, and a form of dress that all embody an urban street consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Although many credit the Bronx, New York, as the mecca of hip-hop culture, it is regarded more broadly as part of the global landscape of contemporary urban youth culture. Its roots extend much farther, however. As one scholar observed, “hip-hop culture grew out of the cross-fertilization of African American vernacular cultures with their Caribbean equivalents.”<sup>2</sup> Afrika Bambaataa, the Godfather of Hip-hop, also asserts that although hip-hop started in the Bronx, where African American and West Indian cultures intersected, one of its elements, rap, is likened to “a chanting style which goes back to Africa.”<sup>3</sup> Veteran hip-hop artists contend that there is a strong connection between the West African griot (storyteller) and the rapper. The West African bardic tradition comprises mainly a storyteller, known popularly as a *griot* or *jeli*, self-accompanied by a musical or string instrument called the kora. This style of storytelling is structured in a poetic narrative form and delivered in a chant-like fashion over the repetitive musical lines played on the kora. Griots are essentially praise poets and serve as oral historians or keepers of the nation’s history and cultural mores. Although the bard seemingly gives credence to the historical roots of rap’s poetic performance, this aspect is not confined to the African continent alone but is rather idiosyncratic to oral traditions throughout the African diaspora.<sup>4</sup>

Another semblance of an African-derived aesthetic expressed in hip-hop arts is most apparent in the art of b-boy/b-girl dance, known popularly to the masses as breakdancing. The dance movements of this element of hip-hop

Afrika Bambaataa



*Tommy Boy/Photofest*

consist of angular turns, stylized twists, sweeps, spins, squats, hip or pelvis gyrations, and upper torso movements. Often recognized by dance scholars as a “Kongo-influence,” that is, “breaking the beat,” or an improvisational dance interlude by which a dancer incorporates an array of the aforementioned movements, it serves, nonetheless, as a template for hip-hop dance styles as well as for other black cultural forms including double-dutch, cheerleading, basketball court moves, and hip-hop’s Brazilian cousin, capoeira.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, African art historian Robert Farris Thompson recognizes the element of movement common to sub-Saharan art that he perceives as “danced art,” unlike the more linear and symmetric style common in the conception of European art. In graffiti, movement defines its lettering style as “bubbled letters or peppermint-stick letters to highly

evolved and complex wildstyle, an energetic interlocking construction of letters with arrows and other forms that signify movement and direction."<sup>6</sup>

Although hip-hop is often assumed to be the result of intercultural borrowings as evident with black and Latino youth engagement particularly during its formative years, the making of a hip-hop aesthetic and performance practice evolve intraculturally among persons of African descent from South and North America and the Caribbean. Hip-hop stands as testimony of this intracultural nexus when tracing its sources from Jamaican dancehall or sound-system culture to African American signifyin' jive. But, moreover, hip-hop performance practice resonates with what I refer to as cultural reversioning, the foregrounding (consciously and unconsciously) of African-centered concepts.<sup>7</sup>

The history shared by people of African descent in the New World is slavery. Conditions of servitude, despite their inhumanity, forced enslaved Africans to react creatively to their new realities in the New World, where their artistic expressions would serve as historical mirrors. When Africans were transported from West and Central Africa via the trans-Atlantic slave trade routes to the Americas, as early as the fifteenth century, their cultural memory was not shattered. Among the first places in the Americas to which enslaved Africans were brought were the Caribbean (e.g., Cuba and Haiti) and certain parts of South America, such as Brazil. In colonial America, however, Africans were initially positioned in society as indentured servants until the 1650s. After witnessing the success of black slavery in the Caribbean, white colonists gave serious thought about replicating a similar system. By the 1660s, slavery had evolved into an institution in colonial America. Although slavery in the North was somewhat more limited, slaves living as parts of smaller households, slavery existed on a much larger scale in the Southern colonies. By the 1790s, slavery had slowly dwindled in the North. Owing to the longer southern summer months, conducive to growing crops, the South became an agricultural empire whose economic subsistence depended heavily upon a black labor force.

Although slavery was an institution throughout the South, it became, nonetheless, a reservoir of Africanisms.<sup>8</sup> At times, the black populace outnumbered the white. Similar demographics existed in the Caribbean and parts of South America. But the interaction between European settlers and Africans in the New World yielded distinct African diasporic experiences—African Americans of the United States or African Caribbeans, for instance, of Barbados, Trinidad (known collectively as West Indians). Slavery became the crucible out of which African peoples in the Americas forged a distinct culture, music, and language system. Hip-hop is undoubtedly a continuum of African-based expression and thus symbolic of diasporic bonding, the cross-fertilization of African American and Caribbean vernacular cultures.

Living in close confines, for instance, on large plantations or in maroon areas, contributed to the maintenance, continuity, and transformation of African expressive culture as well. These black expressive forms include locution through storytelling, toasting, and verbal play (via veiled/coded speech or signifying), intoned speech patterns (a continuum of African tonal language speaking patterns), dance/movement and music (as interrelated arts or inseparable entities), and art for utilitarian purposes.

Social conditions continued to have a bearing on the evolution of forms that predate hip-hop but no doubt serve as its antecedents. The blues, for example, which developed roughly post-Reconstruction, was a direct outgrowth of the “Jim Crow” South, where slavery was reinvented as sharecropping, a peonage system dominated by African American farmers and their families. Although music scholars often state that the work songs and field hollers that date back to slavery were precursors of the blues, blues emerged as a musical form that echoed the conditions of servitude during the late 1880s and early twentieth century. The blues was traditionally delivered in a sing-songy manner and oftentimes performed as a poetic utterance or lyrical poetic with an AAB rhyme scheme, as illustrated by an excerpt from “Special Rider Blues,” by the Mississippi bluesman Son House:

Well look here honey, I won't be your dog no mo'.  
Well, look here honey, I won't be your dog no mo'.  
Excuse me honey for knockin' on your do'.<sup>9</sup>

Although the musical accompaniment for early or rural blues varied, the guitar was, nevertheless, most common. Most important, the blues artists rendered statements about current conditions or issues of the day affecting community (or simply personal) reflections about a condition, representing a metaphysical state of mind.

Other precursors of hip-hop musical culture include the African American-performed sermon, likened in style to that of an West African griot performance, or the toast, a long narrative poem rendered in rhyming couplets that celebrate the victory and the defeat of opposing characters, a continuum of the African epic poetic tradition.<sup>10</sup> Verbal play common to the toast include repetition, mimicry, metaphor, boasting, exaggeration, formulaic expression, humor, and above all, signification, commonly called “signifyin'” among black vernacular speakers. Signifyin' is a verbal form that is used to refer to a person or situation through the use of indirection, in which meaning is suggestive, or direction, in which meaning is explicit in references toward a family member—namely the mother. The latter device is popularly called “the dozens” or “snaps” and

is performed in rhyming couplets. Among the most celebrated toasts is "The Signifying Monkey," made popular via audio recordings by comedian Rudy Ray Moore, also known as Dolemite, in the 1960s black action films. One popular version of the traditional "Signifying Monkey" clearly illustrates features and verbal forms including the dozens and signifyin'. It begins with a lion and a monkey engaging in a verbal tussle after the lion has literally stepped on the monkey's toes. The monkey is forced to hide, however, when the lion begins to exercise his superior force, and soon a regular practice is established whereby the monkey "bullshits" from his tree and the lion "kicks his ass" in return. Eventually, the monkey, resolving to use his wits to level the playing field, tells the lion, "There's a big bad muthafucka comin' yo way./He talked about yo' people 'til my hair turned gray."<sup>11</sup> More personal insults about the lion's family follow, all attributed to this fictional slanderist who is alleged to have escaped from the circus. The rhyming couplet structure of a toast, as in the above, is considered a forerunner of lyrical structure found in rap music.

Facial expressions, body gestures, and movement enhance the effectiveness of the toast or other vernacular forms. Hence, the employment of body movements integrated with song via kinetic oral channels—as expressed in work songs, black girls' play songs, or boys or men on the street corner doing the hambone—is maintained through hip-hop performance.<sup>12</sup> Even the asymmetric designs in material art such as quilting, created by taking scraps of cloths discarded by family members that are interlocked by stitches, regardless of shapes and colors, parallels a similar process for creating beats by hip-hop DJs. In a spiritual sense, hip-hop, like early black musical forms, incorporates elements of spirituality from "crossroads" as heard in the bluesman Roberts Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's "Tha Crossroads" to themes germane to the folk or "Negro" spirituals about heaven with songs such as "I'll Fly Away," performed by Faith Evans in her eulogy to The Notorious B.I.G. in "I'll Be Missing You," to Richie Rich's eulogy to Tupac in "Do G's Get to Go to Heaven."

## BLACK EXPRESSIVE CULTURE IN URBAN TRANSITION

In the 1920s, African Americans transported Southern traditions to the urban North during the massive migration period. These traditions were soon transformed in the new context. For example, the Southern jook joint became the street-corner cavern or speakeasy club, and the old wooden shotgun-structured church was replaced by the urban storefront church. In this new urban context, African American dance emerged as an art form no longer confined to jook joints but also present in urban arenas such as dancehalls and theatrical stages. Dances such as tap, the Lindy hop,

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and the Big Apple simultaneously superimposed a variety of movements ranging from angular turns, stylized twists, and sweeps to pelvis gyrations and upper torso movements, performed as couple dances or as solos, all with a personal sense of style and attitude.<sup>13</sup> Southern vernacularisms, too, evolved as urban ways of speaking characteristic of reassigning alternative meanings to English words and creating nonstandardized or new vocabulary in constant flux, known commonly among the urban black masses as jive talk. Some of the Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Langston Hughes, capitalized on urban jive and blues forms in their works as urban jive talk became the parlance of jazz culture. By the late 1940s, two black Chicagoan radio jockeys, Al Benson of WGES and Holmes “Daddy-O Daylie” of WAIT radio, introduced jive talk over the airwaves as a way to communicate with their urban black listeners. It was the latter, however, along with Lavada Durst, known to his audience as Doc Hep Cat, of KVET in Austin, Texas, who exploited rhymin’ in jive to their audiences. A typical Doc Hep Cat radio rhyme follows:

I’m hip to the tip, and bop to the top.  
I’m long time coming and I just won’t stop.  
It’s a real gone deal that I’m gonna reel,  
So stay tuned while I pad your skulls.<sup>14</sup>

Possessing the power of the word exalted these radio disc jockeys as heroes in their respective ‘hoods. Black personality jocks’ vernacular speech styles were imitated by other jockeys both black or white—such as Lavada “Doc Hep-Cat” Durst of KVET in Austin, Hunter Hancock of KFVD and KGFJ in Los Angeles, Jack “the Rapper” Gibson of WERD in Atlanta, Martha Jean “the Queen” Steinberg and Rufus Thomas of WDIA in Memphis, and Tommy “Dr. Jive” Smalls of WWRL of New York—just to name a few. In addition to their artful use of jive and rhyme, black radio DJs employed “talking through” and “riding gain”: in the former, the DJ lowers the volume of the music and continues to talk as it plays; riding gain, on the other hand, occurs when the disc jockey boosts or lowers the volume on the audio board in order to accent various parts of a record.<sup>15</sup>

Although black comedians such as Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, and Pigmeat Markham were by no means secondary to the use of jive and rhyme in their performances, one athlete who deserves mention in this regard is Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay). Ali’s signature tactic by which to taunt his opponents was with rhyming couplets about his athletic prowess. To one of his challengers, Ernie Terrell, Ali said

Clay swings with a left, Clay swing with a right.  
Just look at young Cassius carry the fight.

Terrell keeps backing but there's not enough room.  
 It's a matter of time until Clay lowers the broom.  
 Then Clay lands with a right—what a beautiful swing.  
 And the punch raised Terrell clear out the ring . . .  
 Who on earth thought when they came to the fight  
 That they would witness the launching of a human satellite?<sup>16</sup>

## THE SETTING OF HIP-HOP CULTURE

Many of the above forms of black vernacular expressive culture are products of orality, transmitted and disseminated via oral or aural channels. Although hip-hop culture is no doubt a composite of past traditions, it would be remiss to ignore the impact of high-technology culture on its development and mediation. In observing the oral transmission of the spoken word by means of mediated channels from television and radio to telephone, Walter Ong finds that this type of transmission shifts from primary orality, by word of mouth [or by ear], to secondary orality, by technological means.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, hip-hop depends on the applicability of technology in its creation and transmission. As such, several secondary oral/aural technological channels affected the development of hip-hop art and served as its creative impetus: (1) Jamaican sound-system or dancehall music of the 1950s to the 1970s, (2) the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and (3) the advent of funk and disco music in the 1970s with its stylistic complement to shaping of hip-hop dance. Hip-hop musicians also frequently recognize Jamaican popular tradition as a source. The late Lumumba "Professor X" Carson noted in an interview that "Blacks growing up in the Caribbean . . . call rap toasting. . . . A lot of toasters [came] out of Kingston."<sup>18</sup> Hip-hop's godfather, Afrika Bambaataa listed a legion of Jamaican toasters—Yellowman, I-Roy, U-Roy, Big Youth—whom he calls "rappers over there like you have over here."<sup>19</sup> However, Bambaataa discerned a difference between the two: "[Jamaican toasters] rap over or use reggae rhythms and dubs."<sup>20</sup> Grandmaster Melle Mel further observed the toasting tradition as rhymes sung in Jamaica.<sup>21</sup>

This toasting tradition directly corollates with the dancehall or sound-system culture of Jamaica. Jamaican sound-system culture evolved in earnest around the 1950s, when many Jamaicans immigrated to Great Britain. After World War II, Britain passed the British Nationality Act of 1948, conferring citizenship upon subjects of the Commonwealth in the West Indies. This exodus affected the musical scene in urban areas such as Kingston, Jamaica, with its thriving swing band scene (modeled after American-style "big band" music). The primary context for this music was in rented-out lodges called dancehalls. "Given this open-door policy, Jamaicans and other West Indians left home 'seeking greener pastures.'"<sup>22</sup>

In search of a musical alternative, local DJs were hired to spin records at the dancehalls. With the booming DJ culture came powerful amplifiers for sound systems, or public address (PA) systems—first rented for use at political rallies in Jamaica. Jamaican Hedley Jones was credited with building the first PA system. PA-system—soon to be called sound system or dancehall—culture was pivotal to the creation and dissemination of Jamaican-style popular music.

The dancehall scene became a phenomenon among Kingston's black working class. The repertory or record list of dancehall DJs consisted mainly of American popular music or rhythm 'n' blues played over the Jamaican airwaves. Moreover, competition was steep among dancehall DJs. Not only were DJs expected to spin the latest or hottest radio hits desired by their dance audiences, but their popularity was predicated on having the largest sound systems. The most competitive and popular dancehall DJs possessed sound systems with huge amplifiers and several speakers equipped booming bass projectors. Dancehall DJs abounded as two-to-three member crews throughout Kingston's black working-class communities. Names of each crew signified their uniqueness, such as Sir Coxsone's Downbeat, Duke Reid's Trojan, Tom Wong, or Tom the Great Sebastian, and Count Matchukie, a major innovator of using the microphone to rhyme to the music in patois, called toasting.

By the late 1950s, Jamaican DJs shifted their musical tastes from American-style popular music to a more indigenous sound. Among the forerunners of Jamaica's most popular genre reggae are ska and rocksteady. The rhythmic accents of ska fall on the "and" of beats 1, 2, 3, 4 and make use of the saxophone and trombone—a precursor of reggae-styled rhythms—but rocksteady made little to no use of horns. Rocksteady, furthermore, was slower and more bassy in sound—a common stylistic marker of reggae and its contemporary styles. Among popular ska artists were the Vikings, Prince Buster, Delroy Wilson, Alton Ellis, and the Vendors, ranked as top rocksteady performers in Jamaica.

With the increase of violence at dancehalls, DJs sought out alternative contexts in recording studios. This change was marked by Jamaica's shift in political power from being a commonwealth of Britain to independence and economic recession as a consequence—or price—of independence. During the 1960s, movements such as that of the Rastafarians complemented the hybridization of ska and rocksteady to produce Jamaican reggae, popularized by Bob Marley and the Wailers. Although dancehall or sound-system culture remained closely linked to Jamaica's black working class, it was soon responsive to a discontented youth (sub)culture known as rudies or rude boys.

Rudies, emblematic of Jamaica's youth gang culture, adamantly expressed disenchantment with Jamaica's economic conditions. They hung



out on Kingston's ghetto street corners, sporting handguns and knives and wearing certain trademark clothing including "very short green serge trousers, leather or gangster-style jackets, and . . . shades [sunglasses]." <sup>23</sup> During the first political election after Jamaica's independence, rudies were divided along political party lines, reflective of a vicious political rivalry between prime minister candidates Michael Manley of the People's National Party (PNP) and Edward Seaga of Jamaica Labour Party (JLP). As one scholar and critic observed, "[t]he city of Kingston was divided like a checkerboard into political garrisons controlled by the gangs under the patronage of party leadership." <sup>24</sup>

When gang activity invaded the dancehall scene, DJs retreated to recording studios. Important in the production of dancehall studio-produced music was Osbourne "King Tubby" Ruddock. While mixing tracks for Sir Coxson, King Tubby discovered a way to fade out the vocal and instrumental parts or to alter them to create several varied versions called dubs. Additionally, King Tubby advanced the dub concept by creating rhythmic reggae grooves consisting of distinct bass lines called riddims. King Tubby's inventions made use of toasting as used in the recent past, but by the 1970s, U-Roy, a known toaster, popularized toasting over dub versions called talk overs, a template for rhymin' to the beats or tracks created or produced by a DJ. Following in U-Roy's path were Big Youth, I-Roy, and Yellowman, among many others. <sup>25</sup>

The Jamaican sound system, dubs, reggae rhythms, talk overs, or toasting concepts were transmitted to the United States by West Indian immigrants during the 1960s. Although West Indians had immigrated to the United States before the 1960s, a large influx of West Indians occurred in the 1960s, when Britain terminated the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, followed by the independence of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago from England and the independence of Guyana and Barbados in 1966. Accordingly, "[t]he U.S. Census reported 171,525 immigrants from the West Indies in New York City [which] represented 73 percent of all West Indian immigrants in the United States, 48 percent of whom arrived between 1965 and 1970." <sup>26</sup> New York City comprised the largest West Indian immigrant community during this period. Among Jamaican immigrants was a young Clive Campbell, soon to be known in hip-hop as Kool "DJ" Herc. Hip-hop DJs Afrika Bambaataa and Joseph "Grandmaster Flash" Sadler are also of West Indian parentage.

Additionally, setting the stage for a rappin' style are those artists of the Black Nationalist movement in the 1960s. Many African Americans have contributed to the shift from jive talk to rap, including the black nationalist figure and Black Panther Hubert or H "Rap" Brown (also known as Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin), whose moniker distinguishes his skill at street jive. In Brown's autobiography, *Die Nigger Die* (1969), he writes in the chapter

“Street Smarts” that he acquired his nickname Rap because of his extraordinary ability at “playin’ the dozens” or “snaps” in rhyming couplets—a game he mastered during his adolescent years, which he learned from the streets. Brown distinguishes the dozens as more brutal in tone, directed toward someone’s mother. Signifyin’, he asserts, is more subtle yet gentler when talking about someone or a situation (in)directly. Below is (a) a typical dozen and (b) a signifyin’ example cited by Brown:

(a)

I fucked your mama/ Till she went blind.  
Her breath smells bad/But she sure can grind.

I fucked your mama/For a solid hour.  
Baby came out Screaming, Black Power.

Elephant and the Baboon/Learning to screw.  
Baby came out looking/Like Spiro Agnew.<sup>27</sup>

(b)

If you’re white,/You’re all right.  
If you’re brown, Stick around.

But if you’re black, Get back, get back.<sup>28</sup>

It is most apparent that Brown’s style of speaking and use of dozens (snaps) or signifyin’ is typical in language play of rap music lyrics. More important, Brown’s signature style of speaking in rhyming couplets during his tenure as a member of the Black Panther Party—“if America don’t come around, America will be burnt down”—gained popular acceptance among black youth in the 1960s, who in turn, renamed “jive talk” as “rap.”

A by-product of black nationalism is the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The Black Arts Movement (BAM) began during the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X (also known as El-Hadj Malik El-Shabazz) in 1965. Pivotal to the BAM is the poet and playwright Leroi Jones, who later adopted the name Imamu Amiri Baraka, meaning “Blessed Priest and Warrior.”<sup>29</sup> After the death of Malcolm X, Baraka sent a letter to black artists summoning them to create art for revolutionary purposes and to use their art to create change in their respective communities. Soon young black artists shifted from using a European canon while creating works of art to an African-based one. Art became, in this sense, community based and functional, and more importantly, it resonated with real-life experiences of African Americans. Black artists realized Baraka’s vision via Afrocentric and black nationalist themes and Islamic ideology. As such, many black artists changed their angli-

cized names to African and Asiatic ones, wore African attire, adopted natural hairstyles (such as braids and Afros), and used certain gestures that signified black pride and culture. During this period, expressions central to African American culture emerged, including the Kwanzaa Holiday.

Art forms, including dance, music, film, and visual art, were reshaped to suit the vision of the new black aesthetic. However, poetry became the centerpiece by which to express the sentiments of black nationalism. Poets of the BAM honed their skills in writer's workshops established in various urban areas, such as the Watts Writers Workshop in Watts or the Umbra Writers Workshop in Greenwich Village. Poetry was not judged merely on the basis of ability to rhyme per se but on skill at articulating themes relevant to African American urban life. Through poetic recitation, black poets made use of repetition, alliteration, breath cadences, heightened speech, intoned speech, and occasional use of expletives, written using stylized indentation, and noncapitalization of *I* (as *i*). Among these poets were Nikki Giovanni, Don Lee, Larry Neal, Ishmael Reed, and Sonia Sanchez, just to name a few. There were poets who experimented with poetry performed to a musical accompaniment, mainly percussion or small rhythm sections. The most popular poets of this style, among the first recognized via their spoken word tours and sound recordings, are the Last Poets (*The Last Poets*, 1970), Gil Scot-Heron (*A New Black Poet: Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, 1970), and Nikki Giovanni (*Truth Is on Its Way*, 1971). For this reason, hip-hop artists recognized these poets as "the first or original style rappers."<sup>30</sup> Of the three, the Last Poets member Jalal "Lightnin' Rod" Uridin recorded a solo album called *Hustler's Convention* in 1973. Unlike the politically toned poetry of the Last Poets, Lightnin' Rod spins toast-like tales about the exploits of two urban characters: Sport, or The Gambler, and his sidekick Spoon. Because of its close association with street lore, black hypermasculinity, and jive talk, *Hustler's Convention* is recognized by veteran hip-hop emcees such as Grandmaster Caz as a prototype of gangsta or reality rap. Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers said, "I knew the entire Hustler's Convention by heart. That was rap, but we didn't know it at the time."<sup>31</sup>

By the late 1960s, Stax Records songwriter and artist Isaac Hayes incorporated the rappin' concept over music with his solo project *Hot Buttered Soul* (1969). Hayes introduced certain song classics as "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" or "Walk On By" with rappin' monologues detailing a love affair gone sour. Similar raps followed suit with other artists, including Millie Jackson and Barry White and funkster George Clinton, with his rappin' monologues over funk music grooves.

The 1970s ushered in a new era of black popular music in the United States. Drawing from and expanding on musical concepts associated with past styles of jazz, blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, black rock 'n' roll, and

soul, black artists created new and diverse forms of contemporary black popular music.<sup>32</sup> The three most distinct styles of black popular music to emerge in the 1970s were funk, disco, and rap. Funk and disco, in particular, were instrumental to the development of rap music as a distinct popular music style.

Black artists, whose musical style comprised soul vocals and a rhythm section surrounded by an orchestral sound, initiated disco. Seminal figures of the disco sound were Barry White of 20th Century Records and groups such as the O'Jays, McFadden, and Whitehead, an in-house orchestra MFSB on the black-owned record label Philadelphia International Records (PIR), started by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. The musical basis for the disco sound was soul or gospel style vocals, an orchestral arrangement supported by punctuating horn lines, and a driving rhythm section with bass-drum rhythm accenting all four beats, subdivided by the hi-hat cymbals.

The disco concept was advanced in dance clubs that employed disc jockeys whose sole purpose was to spin records continuously. To facilitate the continuous play model, the 12-inch vinyl record was invented by Tom Moulton, which extended or doubled the playing time of a single 45 rpm. The 12-inch record became a staple in the vinyl collection of early hip-hop disc jockeys.

By the mid-1970s, disco was monopolized by European producers, who reshaped its sound by structuring its bass lines as an eighth-note bass-line figure outlining the notes of a chord or in octave skips, highlighting the bass drum on all four beats, and sustaining orchestral or string lines, with less emphasis on punctuating horn lines, occasionally increasing its tempo. In maintaining a black aesthetic edge, European producers such as Pete Bellotte and Giorgio Moroder featured an upfront African American female vocalist performing in a soulful or quasi-gospel style. Additionally, popular culture cashed in on disco's growing popularity in the mainstream with films such as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), featuring actor John Travolta and the music of the Bee Gees. Popular music critic Nelson George notes the sudden change toward disco in the American mainstream:

Disco movers and shakers were not record executives but club deejays. Most were gay men with a singular attitude toward American culture, black as well as white. They elevated female vocalists like [Donna] Summer, Gloria Gaynor, Diana Ross, Loleatta Holloway, Melba Moore, and Grace Jones to diva status, while black male singers were essentially shunned. Funk, which in the late 70s was enjoying great popularity in the South and Midwest, was rarely on their playlists. It was too raw and unsophisticated, and one thing dear to the hearts of disco fans, gay and straight, was a feeling of pseudosophistication.<sup>33</sup>

Alongside the disco craze came funk. The pioneering of the funk music concept can be credited to the late James Brown. As a progenitor, Brown advanced what he refers to as an “on the one feel” and a more earthy, gritty, sound characterized by interlocking horn and rhythm section groove lines peppered with Brown’s preachy vocals and grunts. James Brown’s songs soon bore the word *funk* in their titles, including “Ain’t It Funky Now” (1969), “Funky Drummer” (1970), “Funky President” (1974), and “It’s Too Funky in Here” (1979). Glimpses of Brown’s sound could be heard in the popularizers of 1970s funk, such as George Clinton (with Brown’s former instrumentalists, including Bootsy Collins on bass), and in the music of Larry Graham, a former bass player for Sly and the Family Stone. Clinton’s and Graham’s collectives, Parliament–Funkadelic and Graham Central Station, placed much emphasis on the pulling-popping-and-slapping bass techniques and soulful background vocals, distinguished by each group’s use of keyboards—Hammond B-3 organ by Graham Central Station and keyboard synthesizers by Parliament–Funkadelic. Other artists who followed in the styles of Clinton and Graham, or combined them, were the Ohio Players, Zapp, Brothers Johnson, Kool and the Gang, Dazz, and George Duke. Many listeners of funk describe this music as a party music that adhered more to an earthy blues-based foundation without yielding to the crossover demands of the mainstream music industry. As George Clinton explains, “We just speeded blues up and called it ‘funk.’”<sup>34</sup> Brown’s and Clinton’s music are among the most widely sampled in hip-hop.<sup>35</sup> Funk music was a vital part of the Los Angeles underground dance culture, providing the beat to pop and lock moves, setting the stage for breakdancing. According to producer, director, historian, and former dancer Thomas Guzman-Sanchez, the forerunner of breakdancing emerged in the clubs or party jams in Los Angeles. Don Campbell stands out as a seminal player in creating the robotic locking dance technique that accompanies the funk sound as popularized by his dance collective, Campbelllock Dancers, or the Lockers.<sup>36</sup> The Lockers introduced their locking-robotic-jerky movements to the masses via the national syndicated television dance show *Soul Train* as well as on *Saturday Night Live* and the *Carol Burnett Show*. The Lockers’ dance style was advanced by the Guzman-Sanchez Chain Reaction dancers and further varied by the Electric Boogaloo Lockers of Fresno, California, who perfected a more robotic locking style called popping in the early 1980s.<sup>37</sup> Hip-hop film classics *Breakin’* (1984) and *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984) introduced popping and locking dance moves to mainstream viewers. Soon popping and locking would be fundamental moves in b-boy/b-girl dance culture.

The preference for funk music over disco was more evident among inner-city youth of New York City, who witnessed the exploitation of dance music by a predominant white middle- to upper-class following. Bill Adler, hip-hop music critic, observed:

In New York City in the mid-70s, the dominant black popular music was disco as it was every place else. The difference about New York was that kids were funk fiends who weren't getting their vitamins from disco music. It was "too nervous," in their terminology, which meant too fast. It was too gay. It was something, but it just didn't move them, and so they were thrown back into their own resources, and what happened was that they started to . . . play a lot of James Brown. . . . His old records were staples, and Kool and the Gang, and heavy funk like that developed. I mean, part of it just had to do with there being a lot of neighborhood parks in New York City . . . and what kind of music was played in those parks by the disc jockeys there.<sup>38</sup>

### A SOCIOCULTURAL OVERVIEW OF HIP-HOP CULTURE: FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Although the overcommercialization of disco did set the stage for hip-hop dance and music, so did other geopolitical factors (such as the disruption of rent-control communities in the Bronx with the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway), postindustrial conditions (including the replacement of industrial factories with information service corporations), and the eventual dwindling of funds from inner-city and public arts programs. In the 1970s, federal monies allocated to inner-city infrastructure were now redirected to build suburban areas. In the phenomenon known as "white flight," these areas had now become a refuge for whites fleeing the neglected inner cities home, to a burgeoning poor black and Latino working class. Thus "modest blocks were bulldozed flat in the name of social progress, and the promise of these high-rise projects rapidly soured" in areas such as the Bronx. Between 1970 and 1975, there were 68,456 fires in the Bronx—more than thirty-three each night.<sup>39</sup> Some observers believe that these fires were the result of two factors: disgruntled residents who devised schemes to force the government to provide alternative housing, and avaricious slum landlords who intentionally arranged to have their housing complexes burned in order to collect insurance payoffs.

As conditions worsened, crime escalated. Most affected were the youth. As a consequence of their environment, some took matters in their own hands by setting up neighborhood patrols against outsiders. Eventually, the style of protection gave way to gang territorial turf wars. Accordingly, 1973 statistics revealed that New York City gangs totaled 315, with over nineteen thousand members.<sup>40</sup> Gang culture eventually spilled over from the streets into the neighborhood clubs, reminiscent of what happened to the Jamaican dancehall scene. Soon, music providers, the DJs, left the indoor club scene and, as an alternative, set up their sound systems in local neighborhood parks or at block parties, creating an outdoor discothèque. As the Real Roxanne observed:

People used to do jams outside in the schoolyard or handball court. Someone used to bring their two turntables out and plug them into the lamp post outside and that's how they got their power. People would listen and dance to music out in the streets."<sup>41</sup>

DJs garnered reputations in their immediate areas. For instance, Brooklyn was home to Maboya and DJ Flowers, and Harlem had DJ Hollywood and Pete "With the Funky Beat 'DJ'" Jones. A legion of these DJs, however, traveled from borough to borough or location to location as street, or itinerant, DJs. DJs were judged at that time on the size of their sound systems—including speakers—and, of course, their repertoire. The street DJ who provided a shift from the latter style of spinning records to the art of mixing beats or break beats was Jamaican-born Clive Campbell of the Bronx, better known as Kool "DJ" Herc. Patterning after the dancehall DJs in Jamaica, Herc, introduced the break-beats (beats) or breaks concept. Rather than play a record in its entirety followed by a fade into the next record as the discotheque DJs did, Herc blended musical fragments or beats from one record to the next by using a cross-fader lever between the two turntables. He also added electronic sound effects—"echoing and reverbing back and forth between the vocal and instrumental track [while manipulating] the treble and bass knobs"—a trademark of King Tubby.<sup>42</sup> Herc's beats consisted of styles from reggae to funk, but there were certain parts of these records that he highlighted, such as the percussion section groove (including bongos/congas, drums, and bass), called the break section. The term *break* also became a catch-all name specific to hip-hop dancers, called breakdancers, who, during the break section, executed stylized moves. Abbreviated from *breakdancers*, male dancers were called b-boys and female breakers b-girls. The insertion of a break section became a trademark of early hip-hop music recordings.

Kool "DJ" Herc's innovation was perfected by Bronx DJ Joseph "Grandmaster Flash" Sadler. Flash realized that during Herc's performances, there was a tendency to skip a beat when shifting from one beat to the next. Flash figured out a way to perfect the mixing of break beats by creating first a one-ear headphone and then a gadget on his turntable unit that allowed him to hear the music playing on one turntable while pre-cueing the next recording on the other turntable without missing a beat. Flash standardized hip-hop DJ turntable techniques, among them backspinning and punch-phrasing, and his protégé, Grand Wizard Theodore, created scratching, popularized in the Herbie Hancock recording, "Rockit" (1983), featuring Grandmixer D.ST.

Another DJ from the Bronx, Afrika Bambaataa (né Kevin Donovan) dubbed Master of Records, possessed an incredible ear for finding beats. "He blended tracks from Germany, Jamaica, the Philippines, California,

and the South Bronx into a beautiful collage called hip-hop jams in the park and created a movement that turned into a world-wide musical and cultural revolution, as well as a billion dollar industry. His parties lifted the dancer into a spiritual state of euphoria based on his overstanding of vibrations, rhythms, cadence, tone, melody and mood."<sup>43</sup> DJs such as Bambaataa, along with others such as his cousin Jazzy Jay, Davy DMX, Whiz Kid, Charlie Chase, Disco Wiz, Disco King Mario, DJ Tex, and female DJ RD Smiley, were accompanied by aspiring DJs or apprentices, forming master-student relationships as surrogate father-son associations. For example, Afrika Islam was considered a Son of Bambaataa, and Funkmaster Flex was recognized as the Son of DJ Chuck Chillout.

Another important thing about Bambaataa was his vision to stop street gang violence in his immediate 'hood, the Bronx River housing project in the South Bronx. In a move similar to that of so many other youths, Bambaataa joined a notorious street gang, the Black Spades. However, by the early 1970s, he redirected his energy by performing as a DJ at local venues. He was later attracted to the philosophy of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X as well as to the black nationalist themes of pride and respect espoused in James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," among others. In an effort to stop street gang violence in his 'hood, Bambaataa incorporated a philosophy of self-help, self-sufficiency, self-respect, and self-esteem and established the Youth Organization at the South River in 1973, which he eventually renamed the Zulu Nation. He describes this nonsectarian organization as "a huge young adult and youth organization which incorporates people that are into [street arts]: breakdancing, DJing, and graffiti. I had them to battle against each other in a nonviolent way, like rapper against rapper rather than knife against knife."<sup>44</sup> Membership in the Zulu Nation extended to black as well as Latino members. To its membership abroad, the Zulu Nation is known as the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN). Furthermore, Bambaataa's Zulu Nation laid the foundation for hip-hop not only as an arts movement but as a youth (sub)culture recognized around the globe. When asked about the etymology of *hip-hop*, Bambaataa traces it to Lovebug Starski, a DJ from the South Bronx. He stated how at Starski's parties, he was known to say, "'hip hop you don't stop that makes your body rock.' So I coined a word myself and started using the word 'hip-hop' to name this type of culture and it caught on."<sup>45</sup>

During the formative years of hip-hop, neighborhood parties or jams incorporated all four elements of hip-hop as recalled in the hip-hop film cult classic *Wild Style* (1983). The film's title derives from a graffiti-writer term meaning "a complicated construction of interlocking letters."<sup>46</sup> Graffiti is perhaps the oldest of the four elements. Although some critics note that graffiti dates to World War II (or even earlier), its recognition



among New York City youth dates back to the 1950s, during the onslaught of gangs who “tagged” their names on neighborhood street walls to mark territory. In 1971, the *New York Times* featured a story of a writer of Greek origin, Taki 183, whose name was tagged throughout the city. Although city officials viewed graffiti as a crime, its writers perceived graffiti as an art, treating subway trains, walls, and even popular landscapes as concrete canvases on which to showcase their art.<sup>47</sup> Graffiti writers prefer to use various spray paints (such as Krylon) and magic markers to create larger works in the form of murals. Writers often produce smaller sketches of art ideas in their sketch pads prior to producing them on a large public canvas. Organizations such as United Graffiti Artist (UGA) and Nation of Graffiti Artists (NOGA) were established in order to provide graffiti artists with certain venues or places, including art galleries or designated neighborhood wall/concrete canvases to exhibit their works. However, docudramas such as *Style Wars* (2005) and *Infamy* (2007) best capture the insider perspectives of graf writers and their relentless efforts to establish graffiti as a legitimate art.

As hip-hop evolved in the Bronx and eventually throughout New York City, street DJs were accompanied by dancers who soon earned reputations as breakers or breakdancers. Although the popularization of certain dance movements, such as the robotic popping and locking moves, is credited to West Coast crews first seen on the syndicated television dance show *Soul Train* and on the early hip-hop films *Breakin'* (1984) and *Breakin' 2* (1984), when hip-hop arts caught the attention of mainstream media in the early 1980s, many thought that breakdancing was exclusively a New York City phenomenon. While partially true, New York City breakers advanced the popping and locking moves and mainly danced on concrete surfaces in parks, subways, and club jams as vividly seen in the hip-hop documentaries *Style Wars* and *The Freshest Kids* (2002). Characteristic of the New York breakers are additional moves from uprocking, toprocking, headspins, backspins, acrobatic movements, extensive use of footwork, and angular and freeze poses. Popular breakdance crews of New York City who dominated during the formative years of hip-hop were the Rock Steady Crew, the Rockwell Association (of the Bronx), the Dynamic Rockers (of Queens), and Rubberband Man and Apache of Brooklyn. The latter two incorporated salsa and the hustle dance moves to create uprock, a stylized move from Brooklyn.<sup>48</sup> It was common to see breakers perform impromptu at hip-hop jam parties, accompanying their favorite DJs.

By the mid-1970s, DJing had become extremely competitive, to the point that DJs soaked the labels off of their vinyl LPs to prevent would-be contenders from knowing the source of their break beats. Also, the invention of certain turntable techniques such as mixing, cutting, punch-phrasing, and scratching—all once done manually—required MCs. Certain DJs who

were once solo acts, such as Kool “DJ” Herc, now comprised several crew members. Herc’s crew, the Herculords, consisted of MCs Clark Kent and Jay Cee and the first lady of the crew, Pebblee-Poo. Afrika Bambaataa’s crew consisted of MCs Cowboy (not to be confused with Cowboy of the Furious Five), Mr. Biggs, and Queen Kenya. Several DJ-MC crews proliferated, among them the Cheeba Crew, Fantastic 5 MCs, the Mercedes Ladies, and the Malachi Crew, but the one DJ-MCs crew that set the model for rhymin’ to the beat of the music, trading rhyming couplets and ensemble shouts, was Grandmaster Flash and his MCs. Flash’s MCs started as a trio but later added two more members to become known as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. The Furious Five MCs included Melle Mel, Cowboy, Raheim, Mr. Ness, and Kid Creole.

Some DJs, however, did foray into MCing themselves, in particular Kurtis Blow and DJ Hollywood, the latter known for his consummate rhymin’ skills, signature lines (appropriated by several MCs), and freestyle ability (to create rhymes “right-off-the-top-of-the-dome [head]”). Although the vernacular term for the MC was *rhymin’ MC*, *rapper* soon gained mainstream currency and eventually replaced the term *rhymin’ MC*.

Hip-hop flourished throughout New York City, earning a profit for its artists and awing listeners by its ingenuity, but it also steadily made its way throughout the eastern part of the United States, at first by way of underground mix tapes. Before it was first commercially recorded, rap music was recorded on cassette or eight-track tapes and sold to fans or friends at local performance venues. DJ Hollywood explained that, during his early career, after learning that he could use two turntables to make a tape, he would sell eight-track tapes for twelve dollars apiece.<sup>49</sup> As hip-hop became more and more popular throughout New York City, several clubs hosted hip-hop arts: Dixie Club, Club 371 of the Bronx, and Harlem’s World of Manhattan Club. But the club that featured hip-hop on a nightly basis was Disco Fever, established by Sal Abbielello. Soon, the Fever would become a magnet for music entrepreneurs seeking to sign rap music talents. Others, such as Kool Lady Blue, an English-punk-clothing-entrepreneur-turned-hip-hop-promoter, promoted hip-hop at the famed Roxy (a former skating rink) and Negril, in lower Manhattan during the early 1980s.

Music industry entrepreneurs recognized the commercial potential of hip-hop music. Early independent record company owners included Bobby Robinson of Enjoy Records, Paul Winley of Winley Records, and Sylvia and Joseph Robinson of Sugarhill Records. The most successful of these labels was Sugarhill Records, which produced hip-hop’s first successful commercial recording, “Rapper’s Delight” (1979), featuring a trio of MCs from New Jersey called the Sugar Hill Gang. However, New York MCs challenged the originality of the Gang’s rhymes; for it is commonly known that rhymes written by Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers were used by members

of the Gang in "Rapper's Delight." New York MCs often credit "King Tim III" (1979), performed by the Fatback Band of Harlem, which featured a rhymin' MC, as the first rap song, circulating a few months before "Rapper's Delight."

As rap music moved farther into the mainstream, it eventually eclipsed the popularity and commercial potential of the other hip-hop arts. Nonetheless, music entrepreneurs from the generation of rap music artists, unlike the aforementioned record producers, started artist management companies for acts and formed rap music labels specializing in street production concepts: that is, underground promotion (i.e., pitching mix tapes of artists before their album officially "drops", or releases). These new school music entrepreneurs included Russell Simmons of Rush Productions Management, Simmons and Rick Rubin, cofounders of the legendary Def Jam Records, and Tom Silverman of Tommy Boy Records. Silverman's first successful rap music act was Afrika Bambaataa and his group Soul Sonic Force. Bambaataa's music introduced a synthesizer-, funk-, and electronic-driven sound called techno funk, as heard in his hit "Planet Rock" (1982). Other successful yet unique rap music acts during this period included the Fat Boys, a trio from Brooklyn known for popularizing the human beat boxvocal rhythmic simulation of drum beats,<sup>50</sup> Kurtis Blow, the first rap act to sign with a major label (Mercury Records), and female MCs Lady B and the trio Sequence, both signed to the Sugarhill Record label.

Between 1980 and 1985, other rap music acts surfaced throughout New York City. Among these artists were Big Daddy Kane, Biz Markie, Boogie Down Productions (started by KRS-One and Scott La Rock), Dana Dane, De La Soul, Doug E. Fresh & MC Ricky D (also known as Slick Rick), Eric B. & Rakim, Kool Moe Dee, Stetsasonic, the Juice Crew (featuring MC Shan and Roxanne Shanté), Jungle Brothers, the Real Roxanne, Ultramagnetic MCs, UTFO, and Whodini, as well as acts from neighboring cities such as Lady B, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, and Schoolly D of Philadelphia. During this period, rap music artists even collaborated with other popular music, including the punk group Blondie's recording "Rapture" (1980, featuring Deborah Harry)—leading some music critics to erroneously identify this as the first rap—and British punk-stylist-entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren's recording "Buffalo Gals" (1982).

Rap music also took the airwaves by storm with its first rap music radio show host personality, Mr Magic. Magic's radio show was launched on WHBI of Newark, New Jersey, in 1979 and later found its permanent home on New York City's WBLS. Magic's show was followed by New York's KISS FM and the hiring of its first hip-hop music host, DJ Red Alert. These shows inspired a legion of radio station programming, including KDAY of Los Angeles, the first radio station to play an all-rap format. KDAY's program

director, Greg Mack, is credited for introducing established East Coast acts to West Coast audiences.

Contributing to the crossover success of rap music is Run-D.M.C., a trio from Queens, New York. Consisting of two MCs, Joseph “Run” Simmons and Darryl “D.M.C.” McDaniels, with DJ Jam Master Jay, Run-D.M.C. established a rap music sound that combined rappin’ over a rock guitar sound. Their single “Rock Box” from their debut LP *Run-D.M.C.* (1983) broke ground as the first rap song programmed for the syndicated rock-oriented video station MTV. After this achievement, Run-D.M.C. released their sophomore LP, *King of Rock* (1985), succeeded by their multiplatinum LP *Raising Hell* (1986) with its innovative rendition of “Walk this Way” by the hard-rock group Aerosmith, who appeared on the recording and in the video with Run-D.M.C.

Simmons’s teaming up with Rick Rubin to create Def Jam Records led to other important innovations in rap music history. Their first solo artist was LL Cool J and the trio the Beastie Boys, a punk-style rappin’ trio who proved the commercial viability of white rap music acts.<sup>51</sup> Ushering in the prototype of national consciousness was Def Jam’s Public Enemy (PE), from Long Island. Dubbed the Prophets of Rage, PE’s main lyricist Chuck D and his sidekick Flavor Flav, along with the Public Enemy’s security

**Run-D.M.C. Shown from left: Darryl McDaniels (D.M.C.), Jason Mizell (Jam Master Jay), Joseph Simmons (Run), as seen in *Krush Groove*, 1985.**



Warner Bros./Photofest

constituent (known as Security of the First World and wearing attire reminiscent of the Black Panther Party) and its production team, the Bomb Squad, introduced listeners to black nationalist rhetoric via sampled speech material of Minister Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X, revolutionizing the art of mixing or creating a recording. PE's production team, masterminded by Hank Shocklee, produced the music for the recording "Fight the Power" (1989). Their extensive use of breaks or beats via digital sampling and the coveted Roland TR-808 drum machine with its sonic boom or kick, producing an array of sound timbres and textures, was considered unprecedented for its time.

**Public Enemy. Shown: Professor Griff (back left), Flavor Flav (front left), Terminator X (white cap), and Chuck D (front right).**



*Photofest*

The success of these groups earned rap further popularity in the mainstream, aided by the creation of MTV's all-rap music programming *Yo! MTV Raps*, in 1988. The vee-jay, or video television host, was graffiti artist Fred Brathwaite, known in the hip-hop world as Fab Five Freddy. Following suit in the rap music-oriented television video programs were Black Entertainment Television's *Rap City* (now known as *Tha Bassment*) and *Video Music Box*. Rap music also ventured farther into the mainstream via television commercials that featured hip-hop music acts as spokespersons for name-brand clothing, sneakers, and soft drinks.

As hip-hop music expanded its roster to include female MCs during the mid-1980s, they, unlike previous MCs, introduced feminist-inspired themes to go with a rappin' style comparable to that of their male counterparts. Most noted in initiating this trend are MC Lyte and Queen Latifah. Another development that opened the doors for female MCs was the "answer-back" raps, or male/female sequels. These songs include "A Fly Girl," by the Boogie Boys, followed by "A Fly Guy," by Pebblee-Poo; "Girls Ain't Nothing But Trouble," by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, followed by "Guys Ain't Nothing But Trouble," by Ice Cream Tee; "The Show," by Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick, followed by "The Show Stoppa," by Salt-N-Pepa; and a bevy of answer-back rap battles among female MCs such as Antoinette, The Real Roxanne, Roxanne Shanté, Sparky Dee, and MC Lyte. Although some of these female MCs, such as MC Lyte and Queen Latifah, sustained long careers in the hip-hop world, female MCs of the 1980s proved the viability and respectability of other female hip-hop artists. By the 1990s, these artists had inspired a legion of female MCs who revolutionized and diversified the images of women in hip-hop music: Bahamadia, Boss, Bytches With Problems (BWP), Da Brat, Eve, Foxy Brown, Harmony, Lady of Rage, Lil' Kim, Mia X, Missy Elliott, Monie Love, Queen Pen, Rah Digga, Remy Ma, T-Love, Trina, and Yo-Yo, just to name a few.

Although it is no surprise how graffiti and b-boy culture circulated on the national circuit, rap music slowly penetrated various regions, tailored to the musical taste and cultural milieu in respective areas. Forerunners of hip-hop music in Los Angeles comprised a techno-funk-quasi-rap style whose representative included Arabian Prince, the Dream Team, Egyptian Lover, Uncle Jam's Army, and World Class Wreckin' Cru, among a host of others. Primary contexts of early hip-hop culture in Los Angeles were skating rinks such as Skateland USA and World on Wheels and clubs such as the Radio (renamed Radiotron in the film *Breakin'*) and the Radio Lounge. This early sound would be replaced by a more funk-driven sound—in which lyrics about gang violence, police repression, and drug lore (such as crack cocaine) abounded—called G-funk or reality rap, and commercially known as gangsta rap.

The rise of gangsta rap styles can be traced to solo acts Toddy Tee with his mix-tape underground hit "Batterram" (1985), and rapper Ice T

(dubbed the Original Gangsta) with his recording “Six in the Morning” (1985).<sup>52</sup> Incorporated in the presentation of gangsta rap is *cholo* culture, affiliated with Chicano gang culture. Cholo is characterized by “a distinctive street style of dress, speech [caló/Spanglish], gestures, tattoos, and graffiti that is a direct outgrowth of a 1930s–1940s second-generation Mexican subculture called *pachuco*.”<sup>53</sup> Other images affiliated with cholo culture popularized in music videos depicting Los Angeles gang culture were lowriders, bandanas, oversized shirts, and baggy pants.

Augmenting the roster of gangsta rap was former drug dealer Eric “Eazy-E” Wright. In 1987, Wright founded Ruthless Records. During this same year, Eazy-E formed the group Niggas with Attitude or N.W.A, whose lyrics targeted issues regarding police brutality upon black and brown men and the ghetto life of Compton (gangbanging, drug dealing, and so on). Group members included MC Ren and DJ Yella, their main lyricist, Ice Cube, and soon-to-be-renowned-hip-hop-producer Dr. Dre. One of their most controversial songs, “Fuck tha Police,” from their debut LP *Straight Out of Compton* (1988), generated much controversy and suspicion in the Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) concerning what were believed to be cryptic messages propagating hate against the government.<sup>54</sup>

N.W.A.’s candid observations about gangs and ghetto culture of Los Angeles spurred a wave of artists who identified with the gangsta rap subgenre—Above the Law, Ice Cube and his affiliate groups, Da Lench Mob, and West Side Connection (featuring WC and Mac 10, and artists on the Death Row & Interscope labels (such as Snoop Dogg [formerly known as Snoop Doggy Dogg] and Tupac Shakur)—as well as Latino acts from Los Angeles: Kid Frost, Mellow Man Ace, and the collective Cypress Hill.

Alternative to the gangsta rap substyle was the gravelly voice of Tone-Löc with his party-oriented best-selling single hit “Wild Thing” (1988) and the Young MC, the songwriter for “Wild Thing,” who followed up with “Bust A Move” (1989).

West Coast acts surfaced in other areas as well, including Oakland’s Too \$hort and MC Hammer and other acts from the Bay area: Blackalicious, The Coup, E-40, Hieroglyphics, The Luniz, Paris, Planet Asia, Spice 1, and Digital Underground.

Southern rap made its way into hip-hop music market, most notably in with the Geto Boys of Houston, who followed in the gangsta style, and the trio 2 Live Crew, masterminded by Luke Campbell of Miami, Florida. During the early 1990s, 2 Live Crew’s LP *Nasty as They Wanna Be* (1989) featured sexually explicit content that spurred a wave of censorship debates involving right-wing organizations and the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) that ultimately led to congressional hearings in 1994. Although the First Amendment protected the Crew as well as the other artists singled out (artists on the Death Row label), rap music artists responded by

recording two versions of LPs deemed sexually explicit—a radio, clean version and an explicit version indicated by “explicit content” warning labels. Creating musical tracks via digital sampling and releasing recordings without seeking permission or clearing copyright also became a growing concern, prompting an amendment to U.S. copyright statutes to include the reproduction of any music via digital means.

By the 1990s, DJing had advanced into a complex system of turntable techniques, launching the turntable into a musical instrument category of its own. Those accomplished on the turntable at creating and making beats on the “wheels of steel” are referred to as “turntablists”—a term coined by DJ Babu of Dilated Peoples. Noted turntable artists, recognized for their unique art form, include the Beat Junkies, X-ecutioners (led by Rob Swift), Invisibl Skratch Piklz (featuring DJ Q-Bert, Mis Master Mike, and so on), Cut Chemist and Nu-Mark of the rap music collective Jurassic 5, and solo acts DJ Honda, DJ Shadow, DJ Symphony, and an array of others. Turntablism is a growing art form of its own, so much so that international competitions are sponsored by the popular turntable brand Technics as the Technics DMC World DJ Championship and the International Turntablist Federation Championship.

As rap music moved farther into the mainstream, business entrepreneurs and marketing strategists began adopting the term *hip-hop* as a cultural signifier for products with a street sensibility as expressed as a style of dress, language, dance, and an attitude. But some artists, such as KRS-One, expressed growing concerns about the commercialization of hip-hop, fearing that it threatened hip-hop culture.<sup>55</sup> But with the rise of hip-hop in the underground, as well as hip-hop community centers (such as Project Blowed in the Leimert Park area of the Los Angeles Crenshaw district and Representing Education Activism and Community through Hip-Hop [R.E.A.C. Hip-Hop, formerly known as the Hip-Hop Coalition]) that do not privilege one art form over the other, KRS-One’s Temple of Hip-Hop, and political incentives such as Bikari Kitwana’s National Hip-Hop Political Convention and Russell Simmon’s Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) conventions, such platforms could “serve as important renewal sites for remapping these interconnections.”<sup>56</sup>

As hip-hop approached the end of the millennium, its presentation undoubtedly diversified beyond scope as nation-conscious rap, with such acts as Arrested Development, Black Star (with the duo Mos Def and Talib Kweli), Common, dead prez, the Roots, and X-Clan alongside Five Percenter rap (such as Brand Nubian, Lakim Shabazz, and Poor Righteous Teachers).<sup>57</sup> Verbally dexterous MCs include Busta Rhymes, DMX, Eminem, Jay-Z, Nas, the Notorious B.I.G., Pharoahe Monch, and collectives like Freestyle Fellowship and Wu-Tang Clan; the Latino hip-hop of Fat Joe and his Terror Squad; the Dirty South bounce substyle<sup>58</sup> popularized by Master P and his



collective; and artists on the Cash Money label, including Juvenile, Lil Wayne, and B.G. of the Hot Boys of New Orleans; Goodie MOB, OutKast, Ludacris, and T.I. of Atlanta; Chamillionaire of Houston; David Banner of Mississippi; Three 6 Mafia of Memphis; and the sing-songy style of Nelly of St. Louis. Another regional substyle of rap is crunk, “a fusion of Miami bass and Memphis buck—roughneck chants with [Roland TR-]808 beats and humming bass.”<sup>59</sup> The crunk style originated in Memphis but was exploited by Atlanta-based artists; producer Lil Jon, self-proclaimed “King of Crunk”; and acts produced by him, including the East Side Boyz, Rasheeda, YingYang Twins, and YoungBloodz. Hyphy is another substyle that evolved in the 2000s. The term was coined by Keak Da Sneak and is associated with dance and music culture distinct to the California Bay Area. Among a select few hyphy artists are E-40, Messy Marv, and San Quinn.

The malleable quality of hip-hop music has lent itself comfortably to other musical styles, thereby creating the musical hybrids evidenced in jazz-rap hybrid acts A Tribe Called Quest, Digable Planets, and Gang Starr; the hip-hop–live-band concept advanced by the Roots and conceived by MC Black Thought (Tariq Trotter) and drummer ?uestlove (Ahmir Khalib Thompson); the rap-gospel or holy hip-hop acts Chris Cooper and S.F.C., Preachas in Disguise, and Soldiers for Christ, the hip-hop–reggae dance-hall hybrid *reggaetón* artists Alexis Y Fido, Calle 13, Daddy Yankee, and Ivy Queen; and the new jack swing introduced by Teddy Riley and his group Guy as a hip-hop–rhythm ‘n’ blues hybrid. Advancing this concept are Mary J. Blige, the Queen of Hip-Hop Soul, Akon, Erykah Badu, Beyoncé and Destiny Child, Chris Brown, Ciara, the Fugees (featuring Lauryn Hill), John Legend, Omarion, Ne-Yo, R. Kelly, Musiq Soulchild, and T-Pain, as well as those involved in the return of soul in the mid-1990s (neosoul) but with a hip-hop sensibility: India.Arie, Erykah Badu, D’Angelo, Alicia Keys, Jill Scott, and Angie Stone (a former member of Sequence), among others.

Popular culture has also witnessed the burgeoning hip-hop film genre, aptly called “new jack cinema.” Often didactic in scope, these films present the grim reality of ghettos and street life, and the tough choices black youths face in order to cope—whether accepting reality or giving in to death. In an effort to bring about a sense of realism, rap music artists were cast to play serious character roles alongside renowned actors. It is worth mentioning a select few of these films and the hip-hop artists who starred in each: *Juice* (1991) with Tupac Shakur, *New Jack City* (1991) with Ice T, *Boyz ‘N the Hood* (1991) with Ice Cube, *Menace II Society* (1993) with MC Eiht, *Above the Rim* (1994) with Tupac Shakur, and *Set It Off* (1996) with Queen Latifah. Of course, not all films with a hip-hop sensibility are dark in scope; satires and comedies have also been filmed, including *House Party* (1990), featuring Kid ‘N’ Play, *Men in Black*, with Will Smith (also known as the Fresh Prince), *Living Out Loud*, featuring Queen Latifah (1998), *I Got*

*the Hook Up* (1998), featuring Master P, and *8 Mile* (2002), a semiautobiographical film featuring Eminem. Eminem's performance of his song "Lose Yourself," from the film's soundtrack, received an Oscar for Best Song in a Film, making him the first rap artist to receive an Academy Award, followed by Three 6 Mafia, the second rap act to garner an Oscar for their song "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" from the film *Hustle and Flow* (2005). Additionally, rap artists Queen Latifah and Will Smith, received Oscar nominations for their roles in *Chicago* (2002) and *Ali* (2001), respectively.

Other hip-hop film genres consist of docudramas showcasing specific artistic elements: *The Show* (1994), *Rhyme and Reason* (1997), and *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme* (2000), concepts about rhyming (e.g., freestyle and ciphers); *Nobody Knows My Name* (1999), a look at the struggles and challenges of female MCs; *Scratch* (2001) and *Keepin' Time* (2001), a sociohistory about turntablism; *The Freshest Kids* (2002), about the origins of b-boy/b-girl culture; *Style Wars* (1983, rereleased 2003), dealing with graffiti art/writer culture and followed by *Infamy* (2005), a profile of graffiti art/writer culture; and *Rize* (2004), which examines a hip-hop-dance subgenre identified with South Los Angeles, called krumping. The art of shooting or making music videos with a street edge sensibility (context, language, dress) opened doors for some music video directors into film directing, including Antoine Fuqua, F. Gary Gray, Brett Ratner, Jessy Terrero, and Hype Williams.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, hip-hop sensibility has influenced the entire scope of music production pioneered by small-scale neighborhood DJs or street-rap music producers, sending it to meteoric heights and launching independent rap music record label owners to mogul status.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, hip-hop continues to penetrate popular culture on its own aesthetic terms through the fashion-industry world with distinct name brands such as Echō and Enyce and clothing lines created by hip-hop artists—Rocawear (Jay-Z), Phat Farm (Russell Simmons), and Sean John ("Sean P. Diddy")—including footwear, such as Lugz and Timberland.

The existence of hip-hop in the twenty-first century proves its efficacy as a cultural expression embraced by youth around the globe.<sup>62</sup> An aesthetic base predicated on self-expression and originality has helped non-U.S.-based artists find their unique voices and linguistic spaces through a hip-hop prism. Contributing to its global success is the explosion of MTV, the circulation of hip-hop film classics, the formation and distribution of international record label subsidiaries by conglomerate music groups (such as Universal, BMG/Sony, and Warner Music Group), the proliferation of the Universal Zulu Nation international chapters, and the accessibility of the Internet. But, regardless of international magnitude, hip-hop remains a cultural practice deeply

informed by African-based performance practices that define its aesthetic qualities.

## NOTES

1. Some hip-hop critics argue that the human beat-box, a vocal rhythmic simulation of a drum and sometimes musical instrument, is an element. However, in the context of my research, I categorize beat-box or beat-boxing as a subcategory of MCing, because it is a vocal technique commonly exploited by MCs.

2. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 103.

3. Afrika Bambaataa, interview with author, June 10, 1986, Manhattan, NY. Please note that all personal interviews with the author are deposited at the Ethnomusicology Archive, University of California, as part of the "Cheryl Keyes Collection, 1975–2001." Refer to the following Web site for further information: <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/institutions/ark:/13030/kt2g501822>.

4. Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 21.

5. Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 33; see also Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 47, with discussion about kinesthetic memory and kinetic orality, and Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, The Hip-Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), which comments about the cooperative influence of hip-hop and basketball.

6. Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1984), 66; see also Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1983) and Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 148–184.

7. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 21.

8. *Ibid.*, 23.

9. From Son House/J. D. Short, *Blues from the Mississippi Delta* (Smithsonian Folkways, 1963), FWO 2467.

10. Joyce M. Jackson, "The Black American Folk Preacher and the Chanted Sermon: Parallels with a West African Tradition," in *Discourse in Ethnomusicology II: A Tribute to Alan P. Merriam*, eds. Caroline Card et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981).

11. Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 198. A similar example of this toast can be found on the comedian Rudy Ray Moore's *This Pussy Belongs to Me* (Kent Records/Comedy Series, 1972), KST-002.

12. For further information, see Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play*.

13. Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues*, 70–110.

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14. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 30.
15. Gilbert A. Williams, "The Black Disc Jockey as a Cultural Hero," *Popular Music and Society* 10, no. 3 (1986): 81.
16. Jack Olsen, *Black Is Best: The Riddle of Cassius Clay* (New York: Dell, 1967), 10.
17. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002 [1982]), 11.
18. Lumumba Carson, interview with author (June 16, 1986), Brooklyn, NY.
19. Afrika Bambaataa, interview with the author, *ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Melle Mel, interview with the author (June 7, 1986), New York, NY.
22. Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 41.
23. Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'N' Mix* (London: Comedia 1987), 72. The rude-boy image also graduated into an attitude called slackness. Eventually, rude boy was adopted by such reggae dancehall "gun lyrics" artists as Bounty Killer, Buja Banton, Ninja Man, Shabba Ranks (the first dancehall reggae artist to garner a Grammy), and "rude girl" Lady Saw. For further readings on the concept of slackness, refer to Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1993) and Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
24. Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town*, 84.
25. An example of diasporic bonding via collaboration in hip-hop is Yellowman toasting on Run-D.M.C.'s recording of "Roots, Rap, Reggae" from the *King of Rock* (1986) LP.
26. Ransford W. Palmer, *Pilgrims from the Sun: West Indian Migration to America* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 20.
27. H. Rap Brown, "Street Smarts," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes, (New York: Garland, 1981), 336–353. Brown comments that some of the best dozen players were girls.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 32.
30. Bambaataa, interview with author, June 10, 1986, Manhattan, NY.
31. Quoted in Steven Hager, *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 49.
32. Portia K. Maultsby, "A Health Diversity Evolves from Create Freedom," *Billboard* (Black Music Spotlight Issue), June 9, 1979, BM10.
33. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988), 154.
34. Quoted in Vernon Reid, "The Vibe Q: Geroge Clinton," *Vibe*, November 6, 1993, 45.
35. Joseph G. Schloss indicates that the "Rap Sample FAQ, an online compendium of sample sources, list as almost two hundred songs that sampled from James Brown's "Funky Drummer," virtually all from the middle to late eighties—and the actual number is probably closer to several thousand . . ." For more information, see Schloss's *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).
36. Quoted in R. J. Smith, "Lock, Pop, and Quarrel," *Vibe*, September 1998, 268.
37. *Ibid.*

38. Bill Adler, interview with author (May 23, 1986), Manhattan, NY.

39. Jim Rooney, *Organizing the South Bronx* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 46; see also the discussion in Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 44–46; and Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 27–34.

40. Nelson George, *Buppiess, B-Boys, Baps and Bobos: Notes on the Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 11.

41. The Real Roxanne, telephone interview with author (July 30, 1986), Brooklyn, NY.

42. Hebdige, *Cut 'N' Mix*, 83.

43. Quoted in Andrew Emery, "Cutting Edge: Who is the Greatest DeeJay Ever?" *Hip-Hop Connection* (May 1988): 26.

44. Bambaataa, interview with author, June 10, 1986, Manhattan, NY.

45. Ibid.

46. See Cooper and Chalfant, *Subway Art*, 27.

47. See "'Taki 183' Spawns Pen Pals," *New York Times*, July 21, 1971.

48. Joseph G. Schloss states that uprocking was a move first introduced around 1968 by Puerto Rican youth of Brooklyn. This discussion has led some critics to suggest that hip-hop may have first started in Brooklyn rather than the Bronx. I argue that *hip-hop* was a term initially used by a DJ from the Bronx, Lovebug Starski, and adopted by Afrika Bambaataa as a catchall term to embrace a collective of artistic forms rendered as graffiti, breakdancing (or b-boying), DJing, and, eventually, MCing. The geopolitical circumstances and faltering infrastructure germane to the Bronx during the 1960s and 1970s fostered an environment in which hip-hop arts coalesced as the interrelated expressions envisioned by Afrika Bambaataa rather than as separate or isolated forms. However, what is interesting is that uprock grew as an alternative art to gang violence initiated by Rubberband Man and Apache, of Brooklyn. Because there were offshoots of gangs from the Bronx in other boroughs, such as Brooklyn, uprocking was incorporated as a b-boy move in much the way that popping and locking were but was further reshaped and adapted as a move by b-boys in the Bronx. For further information on b-boy/b-girl dance culture, see Joseph G. Schloss, "'Like Old Folk Sound Handed Down from Generation to Generation': History, Canon, and Community in B-boy Culture," *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 3 (2006): 411–432.

49. DJ Hollywood, interview with the author (August 18, 1986), Harlem, NY.

50. Although Fat Boys member Darren "The Human Beat Box" Robinson popularized the use of the human beat-box concept via recording, the origination of the human beat-box is credited to rapper MC Doug E. Fresh.

51. Def Jam also produced the white duo 3rd Bass. By the 1990s, Vanilla Ice (né Robert Van Winkle) was well on his way to becoming rap's first solo superstar. His career was shortlived after the controversy surrounding the unauthorized use of a chant from Alpha Phi Alpha, a black fraternity, as the basis of his song "Ice Ice Baby," from the album *To the Extreme* (1990). Many hip-hop-heads (hip-hop fans) questioned Vanilla Ice's originality.

52. Although Toddy Tee's underground mix-tape version "Batterram" (1985) is considered the first rap in gangsta style, Ice-T's "Six in the Morning" is considered the first West Coast commercial gangsta rap recording. The first gangsta rap

commercial recording, however, is thought to be Philadelphia MC Schoolly D's with "Gangster Boogie" (1984), followed by "PSK What Does It Mean?"

53. James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994 [1988]), 3.

54. For an excellent source specifically dealing with gangsta rap in Los Angeles, see Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 117–158.

55. See Margena A. Christian, "Has Hip Hop Taken a Beatdown or Is It Just Growing Up?" *Jet*, April 9, 2007: 54–56, 58–59; Michael Eric Dyson and Kevin Powell, "Two Sides: Is Hip Hop Dead?" *Ebony*, June 2007: 60–61; Tracy Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Young Black Women, Hip-Hop and the New Gender Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

56. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 228; see also Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip-Hop Culture* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2004); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

57. See Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005).

58. DJ Jubilee of New Orleans, who did a remake of Juvenile's "Back that Azz Up" (1998) is credited with ushering in the bounce style. The bounce style can be described as a sparse musical track with emphasis placed on a pulsing snare drum with booming kick drum (re)produced on a drum machine. The bounce style was exemplified by Jay-Z in his hit "Can I Get A" (1998) and further reshaped by other ATL (an abbreviation for Atlanta) artists to create crunk, a stylized funk affiliated with Lil Jon.

59. Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: Outkast, Timbaland, and How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 286.

60. Other noted music directors who have steadily worked in the hip-hop music video industry are Philip Atwell, Paul Hunter, Little X, Diane Martel, Dave Meyers, Chris Robinson, and Millicent Shelton, among many others.

61. Among some of the most successful DJs-turned-producers are DJ Premier, Dr. Dre, Lil Jon, Prince Paul, and Timbaland. Examples of independent rap music record labels that have become million-dollar enterprises are Dr. Dre's Aftermath Entertainment, Eminem's Slim Shady, Sean "P. Diddy" Comb's Bad Boy Entertainment, Jermaine Dupri's So-So Def, Queen Latifah's Flavor Unit Records, Jay-Z's Roc-A-Fella, and Russell Simmons's Def Jam.

62. A growing number of global specific studies on hip-hop are being written in various languages and published abroad. Within this paper, however, I will provide a partial list of English-language book-length works that address global hip-hop: Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Path of Cultural Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); James G. Spady, H. Samy Alim, and Samir Meghelli, eds., *The Global Ciph: Hip Hop Culture and Consciousness* (Philadelphia, PA: Black History Museum Press, 2006); Ian Maxwell, *Phat Beats: Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2003); Tony Mitchell, ed., *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2001); and Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (New York: Cambridge, 2000).

# The Blues

*Don Cusic*

Blues was the music of the black working class in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. During the earliest part of the twentieth century there were essentially two types of blues. Vaudeville blues was descended from minstrel shows and featured performers with a band in a show staged to attract a paying audience, but Delta blues came from Southern cotton fields and was personified by a single man with a guitar.

Musically, the blues is a combination of British and European melodies and harmonies with African rhythms and work song call-and-response formats. The blues has been called an attitude, the self-expression of down-trodden blacks in a repressive white society, and a means of conveying heartfelt emotions to a hostile world. The blues as music certainly represented all of those factors—as well as a means of enjoying life, providing entertainment, and socializing on Saturday night.

Vaudeville blues and Delta blues evolved into rhythm and blues after World War II, the music of blacks who moved to Northern cities during the Great Migration. During the 1950s and early 1960s, rhythm and blues was a major component of rock 'n' roll; during the mid-1960s “Soul” music emerged from inner city blacks and studios in Memphis and Muscle Shoals, Alabama. During the 1970s R&B and soul music were key components of disco and dance music; from the 1980s forward rap and hip-hop have been the music identified with blacks (particularly urban blacks), the traditional blues relegated to a niche genre that sees musicians play before small but appreciative audiences in a subculture supported by a handful of clubs, record labels, magazines, and Web sites dedicated to blues and blues performers.

## ROOTS OF THE BLUES

The roots of the blues in America go back to work songs African Americans sang in southern fields during the period of slavery in the United States. It includes field hollers, cries, calls, arhoolies, and spirituals, as well

as washboard, jug, and string bands. As the blues developed in urban areas—when some blacks moved out of the rural South after the Civil War—this music became more rhythmic and included songs from marching bands, ragtime, gospel, pop, vaudeville, and minstrel shows.

Slavery in America began in 1619 when a Dutch ship with Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. After 1808, the importation of slaves from Africa into the United States was illegal, but government officials tended to look the other way, and in 1859 more slaves were imported into the United States than had been in any year when the slave trade was legal. Thus, throughout the pre-Civil War South were slaves who had just arrived from Africa as well as slaves whose ancestors had been in America for several generations. Because of this, the African influence varied a great deal throughout the slave population.

In work songs done with a group, a leader generally set the tempo of the labor by singing while his fellow workers sang an answer in unison. This form of singing—called leader-and-chorus or call-and-response—has direct links to African traditions.<sup>1</sup> Drums and horns were banned by slave owners in the South because these instruments were used to send messages that could potentially lead to slave revolts, a constant fear among Southern whites before the Civil War.

The only instrument imported directly from Africa during the pre-Civil War years was the banjo, or “banjer” as it was called.<sup>2</sup> The instrument developed from lute-like instruments that had migrated from Middle Europe to West Africa, and then to the United States during the slave trade. In addition to the banjo, blacks learned to play fiddle; these two instruments became the nucleus for string bands on plantations. The songs played were most likely jigs and reels from Scottish and Irish traditions.

The major crops for plantations in the pre-Civil War South were tobacco and cotton, and these crops needed a large slave work force to make them economically profitable. Because cotton fields were large, the types of singing there included both individuals singing to themselves, generally in what were called “moans,” and call-and-response, in which a leader sang out a line and others answered. “Hollers,” or “hoolies,” also developed, in which one singer sang or perhaps shouted while a long, loud melody rose and fell and perhaps broke into falsetto. This melody was picked up by another worker and reverberated like an echo around the field—or several might join in a chorus. This “holler,” or “hoolie,” replaced the group work song, for there was no need for cotton field workers to work together in unison.<sup>3</sup> If this hoolie was done in a corn-field, it was called an “arhoolie.”<sup>4</sup> In both cases, notes were bent or struck slightly off-key or slurred. This “blues slur” comes when the third is flattened to a seventh or emotion is communicated by singing around a note.<sup>5</sup>

The work song and field hollers were of African origin and became an extension of the African tradition. However, it was not until blacks



came to the United States that they had a common culture. It was here they had one language—English—rather than a number of tribal languages; and here they were influenced by the British folk songs and their harmonic patterns. Thus the blues arose from the blending of African influences with European folk songs, melodies, and harmonic structures in the American culture. In general, slaves took melody and harmony (only minimally a part of African music) and fused them with rhythm, a central part of African music not deeply embedded in European music.

Although slavery was abolished after the Civil War and the plantations broken up into small farms, the South kept gang labor through penitentiaries. Here, large gangs of men sang work songs as they split rocks, built roads and other public works, and rebuilt the South, which had been devastated by the Civil War. In work songs, the value of singing came from its comfort and solace as well as its efficacy in combining strength for more effective working in rhythm and unison.

In addition to work songs the blues had another source as well, rooted in the leisure activities of Saturday night.<sup>6</sup> The work songs and field songs served a function: they helped men and women get through their work days. But at night, particularly Saturday night, the ballads with the eight- and twelve-bar forms and conventional harmonic progression created another aspect of the blues. This was not the blues of people working; this was the blues of people at leisure.

## BLUES ON RECORD

The first commercially successful blues recording was “Crazy Blues,” by Mamie Smith, recorded in New York and released in August, 1920. The song was written by Perry “Mule” Bradford, an African American composer, manager, and entrepreneur. Bradford was born in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1895 but moved with his family to Atlanta in 1902, where he grew up in a home next to the Fulton Street Jail, where young Bradford first heard inmates singing the blues.<sup>7</sup>

Bradford entered vaudeville as a singer, dancer, and piano player in Atlanta then went on the road with Allen’s New Orleans Minstrels in 1907 and came to New York, where he was involved in staging the musical revue *Made in Harlem*, which featured one of his compositions, “Harlem Blues.” The song came from a number he learned in 1912, “Nervous Blues,” and he revised the original. The song’s melody had been used before; stride pianist James P. Johnson used it in his “Mama and Papa Blues” and part of the melody probably came from “Baby Get That Towel Wet,” an old bawdy song played in sporting houses. Mamie Smith had been singing “Harlem Blues” regularly in *Made in Harlem*.

The first blues recording occurred during the early period of the Harlem Renaissance when the New York entertainment industry embraced black entertainers in Harlem, primarily because of Prohibition and the fact that so many “speakeasies” featuring black entertainment were located in Harlem. Bradford approached both Columbia and Victor about recording “Crazy Blues” with a black singer but was turned down.

Fred Hager, manager of Okeh, a small label belonging to the General Phonograph Company, financed by the German firm Carl Lindstrom, agreed to record “Harlem Blues” but insisted the song be sung by Sophie Tucker, a heavy-set Russian immigrant with a powerful voice who broke into show business in the early 1900s in New York.<sup>8</sup> Tucker’s voice can be described as “soulful” and “bluesy”; early in her career she had performed “coon songs” in blackface and fit a “Mammy” stereotype. Later, she did away with the blackface but continued to record and popularize African American songs, including “St. Louis Blues” by W. C. Handy, which became the first million-selling blues song through sheet music sales in 1917.

Sophie Tucker could not do the session because of contractual commitments so Mamie Smith, Bradford’s original choice, recorded the song. In recording the song, Bradford changed the name from “Harlem Blues” to “Crazy Blues” to avoid any possible copyright litigation by the musical revue backers.

“Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith reportedly sold 75,000 copies during the first month of its release and during the first year of its release sold over one million copies. Perry Bradford supposedly received almost \$20,000 in royalty fees, less than half what he was legally entitled to receive. However, at this time it was extremely difficult to get record labels to pay correct royalty fees, for record companies were the only ones who documented how many records were manufactured and sold.

“Crazy Blues” proved to be an astounding commercial success and led recording companies to look to African American musicians and consumers for future releases. This recording, by an African American singer released nationally, led white music industry executives to become aware of a large market for “race” music, realizing that the Negro population could and would buy recordings of blues singers and blues songs. It was a giant revelation to these white executives, who generally did not understand black music or the black culture—but merely sought to capitalize on it because there was money to be made.

## FIRST RECORDINGS BY BLACKS

Although “Crazy Blues” marks the beginning of African American performers successfully recording blues numbers and record companies successfully marketing them to the African American population, this was not

the first time the American public had heard blues or the first time that black performers had been recorded.

Thomas Edison's company recorded George W. Johnson, the only African American to record on cylinder; Johnson recorded his "Whistling Coon" minstrel number for the company. The Victor Talking Machine Company recorded comic Bert Williams, believing he would be popular with white audiences and hoping for sales in the African American community as well. Williams recorded fifteen titles for Victor, most of them show tunes or comedy routines from his stage repertoire; "Elder Eatmore's Sermon" sold over half a million units.<sup>9</sup>

The Dinwiddie Colored Quartet, who played authentic African American folk music, was recorded by Victor in 1902. The six songs recorded by the group were all slow spirituals sung a capella. The Fisk Jubilee Singers recorded in 1908, but the next major breakthrough for black recording artists did not occur until 1914 when James Reese Europe's Society Orchestra recorded for Victor as part of the series endorsed by the white dance team the Castles.

Although the major white-owned recording companies did not record many African American artists, they did record songs that were blues-influenced. (Columbia Record Company excluded black performers from recording until 1920; they turned down Bert Williams before the great Black performer recorded for Victor.) These songs were all done by white performers and were advertised as "negro novelty," "Up to date comic songs in negro dialect," "plantation airs," "Ethiopian airs," and, most often, "coon songs."

### ***W. C. Handy***

Tin Pan Alley songwriters wrote a number of songs derived from blues and African American folk songs, particularly after W. C. Handy moved from Memphis to New York in 1915. Handy and his partner, Harry Pace, established their own music publishing firms. Other African Americans who came to New York and opened publishing companies included Sheldon Brooks of Mobile, Alabama, Clarence Williams of New Orleans, Perry Bradford of Atlanta, and Bert Williams.

Before 1920, Handy had published his most famous blues compositions, including "Memphis Blues" in 1912, "Jogo Blues" in 1915, "Saint Louis Blues" in 1914, "Yellow Dog Blues" in 1914, "Joe Turner Blues" in 1916, and "Beale Street Blues" in 1917. Handy's success showed Tin Pan Alley the commercial potential for blues songs, and a number of derivative tunes came off the assembly line to satisfy the demand in vaudeville theaters, dance halls, and cabarets. By 1920, a form of the blues had entered mainstream popular music. This form was generally referred to as "vaudeville

Bessie Smith in the 1920s.



*Photofest*

blues” and was based on commercial, rather than folk, tradition. These used clichéd song formulas in the standardized twelve-bar, AAB stanza format. However, they became popular standards when performed by authentic African American vocalists or transformed by African American composers. Among the vocalists who popularized vaudeville blues were Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Sara Martin, Alberta Hunter, Sippie Wallace, Mamie Smith, Victoria Spivey, and Bessie Smith. Composers included W. C. Handy, Perry Bradford, James and Rosmond Johnson, Spencer Williams, Porter Grainger, Clarence Williams, and Thomas Dorsey. Most of these composers and performers were connected to the South and traditional black folk music.

## BLUES RECORD LABELS

The success of “Crazy Blues” led a number of small labels to record and release blues recordings. “The Jazz Me Blues” and “Everybody’s Blues” by Lucille Hegamin were released on the Arto label, Lillian Brown released blues songs on Emerson, and Daisy Martin released sides on Gennett, all in 1921. Additionally, recording companies Perfect, Pathe, Ajax, Vocalion, and Paramount recorded and released blues recordings.

African Americans formed record labels in the 1920s, but success was difficult to achieve. Black Swan was begun by W. C. Handy and Harry Pace in January 1921.<sup>10</sup> They recorded Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter and had an excellent year in 1921, but in 1924 they were deeply in debt and had to sell their assets to Paramount. The Sunshine label was begun in Los Angeles by two African American record store owners in 1922 and released songs by Roberta Dudley and Ruth Less and a jazz instrumental by Kid Ory’s jazz band. This label also folded.

Meritt Records, formed by Winston Holmes in 1925 in Kansas City, lasted three years. Black Patti, begun by “Ink” Williams, the premier black talent scout in Chicago in the 1920s, was formed in 1927 but lasted less than a year. The major problem with Williams’s label was that although he had access to the best African American singers and musicians in the business, he could not get his product distributed effectively outside Chicago.

It was difficult for any new label to get a foothold in the industry—and even more so for a black-owned label. However, the small labels did show the majors there was a market for blues recordings to African American consumers, and the major labels began recording traditional blues in earnest around 1926.<sup>11</sup>

## FIELD RECORDINGS OF THE BLUES

After the initial recordings by the vaudeville blues singers—a field dominated by women—in New York, recording companies hit the road. During this early period, Paramount recorded more blues than any other label; other labels recording blues in the mid-1920s included Okeh, Columbia, and Victor. In 1926 Vocalion, owned by the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company of Chicago, emerged as another major “race” label with Jack Kapp as head of the “race” division.

This began the heyday for traditional blues recording, the years 1926–1929, when the major labels did their first extensive field recordings. These labels generally recorded in Dallas, Memphis, Atlanta, and Chicago.

The first major blues artist to emerge from these recordings was Blind Lemon Jefferson, who recorded seventy-five songs for Paramount from 1926 to 1930. He was the best-selling rural bluesman of the 1920s. The

songs recorded usually listed him as a writer (thirty-one listed him as composer), and the remainder listed no composer.<sup>12</sup> In reality, a number of these songs came from the folk and oral tradition, and the singer's contribution was one of interpretation, altering existing songs and adding verses.

The success of Blind Lemon Jefferson and other rural blues artists encouraged major labels to head south to conduct field recordings of African American artists. Perhaps the most successful of these field recorders was Ralph Peer, who visited Atlanta in the early twenties for the Okeh label and recorded blues singer Lucille Bogan. Peer then joined Victor and continued his field recordings.

Ralph Peer gave both "hillbilly" and "race" recordings their labels.<sup>13</sup> He named the music "race" because that was the term the influential black-owned newspaper, *The Chicago Defender* used, after a debate about whether the terms "Negroes," "colored," "African," "blacks" or something else should be used. African Americans who referred to themselves as "the race" during this time did so proudly.<sup>14</sup> Ralph Peer eventually recorded a number of well-known blues musicians, including Tommy Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, Furry Lewis, Gus Cannon and His Jug Stompers, and the Memphis Jug Band.

## INFLUENTIAL BLUES ARTISTS IN THE 1920S

In 1928 Leroy Carr became famous with his "How Long, How Long Blues." Carr, born in Nashville in 1905 and raised in Indianapolis, became one of the most influential blues singers with his piano-guitar backing (Carr was a pianist and his guitar accompanist was Scrapper Blackwell) and his smooth, pop sounding vocals, a step away from the raw vocal sound of most early blues singers in the South. Carr was so popular and influential that when he died in 1935 there were two songs about his death. Bumble Bee Slim (real name Amos Easton) recorded "The Death of Leroy Carr" for Decca, and Bill Gaither recorded "The Life of Leroy Carr" on Okeh.<sup>15</sup>

Another early influential artist was Tampa Red (real name Hudson Woodbridge), who, with Georgia Tom, recorded "It's Tight Like That" in 1929. Georgia Tom was Thomas Dorsey, who later became the father of black gospel. "Tight Like That" was definitely not a gospel song; it was double-entendre blues. However, the song reportedly sold 750,000 copies and provided Dorsey with his first professional success.<sup>16</sup>

Tampa Red continued to record after Georgia Tom split and had hits with "Somebody's Been Using That Thing" and "It's All Worn Out." Another important blues act before the Depression was Memphis Minnie (Minnie Douglas), who had a hit in 1931 with "Bumble Bee" on Columbia.

After 1930 as the Great Depression grew and spread, the recording labels virtually abandoned blues recordings. The major reason was that the

market dried up—blacks could hardly afford the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, much less records.

## BLUES DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Radio blossomed during the 1930s, and listeners heard big band and country music as well as comedy, drama, and soap operas; but the blues were not part of the early years of radio's golden age. First, blacks—with few exceptions—were generally barred from radio broadcasts, and even when there wasn't an "official" policy against African Americans on radio, business practices of the day excluded the exposure of music by blacks on radio.

The rate of unemployment for black males has been estimated to be about seventy-five percent during the Great Depression.<sup>17</sup> Because money was difficult to come by, especially for blacks, the record labels, although they continued to record some blues during the Depression, cut back significantly on their recordings and releases. In 1931 Paramount closed down, and Columbia and Brunswick discontinued their "race" series. In 1932 Vocalion discontinued its race series; in 1934 Gennett went bankrupt and Okeh discontinued its race series. Small labels, unable to survive the Depression, were absorbed by large labels until only two major recording labels existed during the early 1930s (Victor and the American Record Company) until they were joined by Decca, which began a race series in 1934 under J. Mayo Williams, who formerly worked for Paramount and Vocalion. For the most part, the major labels concentrated on big band and pop music, both of which were getting regular exposure on the radio and had a proven audience.

## BLUES DURING THE 1930S

Although a few blues artists continued to record, the recording labels shifted their emphasis to the big bands, who were heard on radio, and to a limited number of country acts. The entertainment industry as a whole shifted toward movies made in Hollywood and toward radio, which was dominated by the networks.

Chicago emerged as a major source of blues talent during the 1930s, primarily through Lester Melrose, who owned a record store and was a major talent scout for labels who came to Chicago to record blues artists. Melrose generally published the songs these artists recorded and often kept the royalties, but he was an important source of talent as Chicago emerged as a center for blues musicians.

One of the most prolific blues recording artists found by Melrose was Big Bill Broonzy.<sup>18</sup> During the years from 1930 to 1934, Broonzy recorded for a number of labels under a variety of names. Broonzy was born in 1893

in Scott, Mississippi in a family with twenty-one children, sixteen of whom survived. His earliest musical influences included string band music. In 1920 Broonzy moved to Chicago as a manual laborer, where he found a thriving jazz scene. In 1926 Broonzy recorded his first sides for Paramount.

Important blues artists who recorded during the 1930s included Cryin' Sam Collins on Gennett; jazz guitarist Lonnie Johnson, who recorded with Duke Ellington; Louis Armstrong's Hot Five; the Harlem Footwarmers, whose hits included "I Got the Best Jelly Roll in Town" and "Don't Wear It Out"; Robert Brown, known as Washboard Sam, whose hits included "C.C.C. Blues," "Levee Camp Blues," "Diggin' My Potatoes," and "Back Door"; Robert Johnson, called the "Shelley, Keats, and Rimbaud of the blues" who only recorded twenty-nine sides before he was poisoned by a jealous husband when he was only twenty-seven years old and whose songs include "Me and the Devil Blues," "Hellhound on My Trail," "Dust My Broom," "Crossroad Blues," and "Love in Vain"; Roosevelt Sykes, who recorded under a variety of names until 1936 when he became known as "The Honey Dripper" for Decca ("honeydripper" is a blues colloquialism for a virile male); Sonny Boy Williamson, a harmonica bluesman who was murdered at the age of thirty-two; and Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman), a partially blind albino who played boogie woogie piano.

During the 1930s, many blues musicians cut their musical teeth in the lumber, levee, turpentine, and sawmill camps of the South. These camps were set up to harvest the South's rich crop of timber, and lumber companies set up a small "city" where workers were housed until the forests were cleared.

In these encampments, entertainment was provided by traveling musicians, who usually played in a shack set up as a bar. The bar itself was rudimentary—generally two barrels with a board across it: hence the term "barrel house." The music the lumber workers liked was loud, raw and raucous, or "barrel house" piano, which had a driving boogie woogie beat.

The songs often had blatant references to sex that were toned down when the musicians played before mixed audiences or when the songs were recorded. But these lumber camps and barrel houses were proving grounds for a number of black musicians. One musician who worked these lumber and levee camps was Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. In 1940 Crudup came to Chicago with a gospel group, the Harmonizing Four, and made his first recordings for Bluebird. In 1954 the first record released by Elvis Presley was "That's All Right, Mama," a song Crudup wrote and recorded in 1948.<sup>19</sup>

## THE ROOTS OF RHYTHM AND BLUES

In 1942 *Billboard* magazine instituted a chart for black artists, "The Harlem Hit Parade." The first charts were dominated by Decca, who had eight of the top ten records with acts such as the Ink Spots, Lionel Hampton, Lucky



Millinder, Bea Booze, Ella Fitzgerald, and Charlie Barnet. The only “indie” on the charts was Savoy with “Don’t Stop Now” by the Bunny Banks Trio.

The most successful black artists on major labels during the World War II years were the Ink Spots, the Mills Brothers, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Jordan, and Nat King Cole, who all appealed to white audiences with a smooth sound that sounded much like the sound of white groups. The major black artist to emerge during this period was Louis Jordan, whose biggest hits, “G.I. Jive” and “Is You Is, or Is You Ain’t (Ma’ Baby?),” which reached the pop charts. “Is You Is” was featured in four Hollywood movies.

Louis Jordan, known as “the Father of Rhythm and Blues,” was the pivotal figure in the development of rhythm and blues because of his success with record sales, on the radio, and in personal appearances. Jordan demonstrated that a large market existed for black-styled music for both white and black audiences. Jordan began recording for Decca in 1938 and had his first chart hits in 1942: “I’m Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town” and “What’s the Use of Getting Sober?” In 1943 Jordan had hits with “Five Guys Named Moe” and “Radio Blues” and in 1945 had a huge hit with “Caldonia.” Also in 1945 Jordan had his biggest hit, “Choo Choo Ch’ Boogie,” written by Vaughn Horton and country songwriter Denver Darling. Jordan played a happy, fun-loving music with a “jump” band, a pared down big band with horns, bass, and drums.<sup>20</sup>

## THE GREAT MIGRATION

During the Great Migration, a period covering roughly from World War I until 1970, more than six-and-a-half million blacks left the rural South and moved to Northern cities. The major migration occurred during the 1940s; in 1940, seventy-seven percent of African Americans lived in the South and forty percent in the rural South; in 1970, about half of all African Americans lived in the South, and less than twenty-five percent lived in rural areas. After 1940 five million blacks moved north, a huge exodus with ramifications that were felt in music and popular culture. Before World War II, most black Americans were strongly tied to agriculture; after World War II, black Americans inhabited cities to such an extent that “urban music” became a euphemism for “black music.”<sup>21</sup>

Musically, there was a shift in taste from the rural-based blues to rhythm and blues, a music characterized by the electric guitar in a band that played loud and long in clubs. This music was a product of segregation. Both a black section of town and a white section of town existed, and in the black section were businesses, banks, and clubs owned and operated by blacks. Blacks wanted to hear a music created by and for a black audience playing on their jukeboxes in the numerous establishments. Blacks in the cities were more “worldly” and dismissive of rural blacks who seemed backward;

Blues musician Muddy Waters performs at New York's Palladium Theater in a benefit performance for the New York Public Library in 1977.



*AP Photo*

young urban blacks dismissed early blues as “field nigger music” and concentrated on rhythm and blues.

The older blues almost died out, except for a few singers and musicians, until the urban folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when young, white music fans searched for and discovered early “roots” music—folk, hillbilly, and blues. This led to the rediscovery of older blues performers who were then booked on folk and blues festivals. The rediscovery of early blues by British teenagers led to a second blues revival during the British Invasion of the mid-1960s, when some of those

British teenagers became rock stars and popularized many old blues songs and performers.

Another blues revival occurred in 1990 when Columbia issued *The Complete Recordings* of Robert Johnson, the legendary blues artist who died in 1938. During the CD era, when consumers shifted from vinyl and tape to CDs, the major labels issued a string of releases from legendary blues performers such as Bessie Smith and Muddy Waters that sold well to consumers and inspired them to look for more blues releases and to seek out blues performers at festivals and in clubs.

In the twenty-first century the blues is a thriving, though relatively small, genre of the contemporary music industry. Blues “stars” such as Keb’Mo, Robert Cray, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Joe Bonamass, Buddy Guy, and the granddaddy of current blues performers, B. B. King—as well as white acts such as the late Stevie Ray Vaughn and John Hammond—continue to sell blues recordings.

Twenty-first century blues is rooted in the sounds of the black blues from pre–World War II up to the rock ‘n’ roll era of the mid-1950s. The music is integrated with both white and black performers, but the essence of the blues, a heavy, sweaty music that wears a smile through hard, tough times, remains intact.

## NOTES

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2. Samuel Charters, “Workin’ on the Building: Roots and Influences,” in *Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 14; Francis Davis, *The History of The Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 35–36.

3. Oliver, *Story of the Blues*, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 18.

5. *Ibid.*, 26; Charters, *Workin’ on the Building*, 27.

6. Oliver, *Story of the Blues*, 26.

7. William Barlow, “‘Fattening Frogs for Snakes’: Blues and the Music Industry,” *Popular Music and Society* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 18–19; Perry Bradford, *Born With The Blues: Perry Bradford’s Own Story* (New York: Oak, 1965).

8. Barlow, *Fattening Frogs for Snakes*, 19.

9. *Ibid.*, 15.

10. *Ibid.*, 21.

11. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

12. Alan Govenar, “Blind Lemon Jefferson: That Black Snake Moan: The Music and Mystery of Blind Lemon Jefferson,” in *Bluesland: Portraits of Twelve Major American Blues Masters*, eds. Pete Welding and Toby Byron (New York: Dutton, 1991), 35.

13. Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Volume III: From 1900 to 1984* (New York: Oxford University Press), 31; Nolan

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Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 92.

14. Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America in the King Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 45; Barlow, *Fattening Frogs for Snakes*, 11.

15. Mark A. Humphrey, "Holy Blues: The Gospel Tradition," in Cohn, *Nothing But the Blues*, 159–163.

16. *Ibid.*, 163–165.

17. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929–1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 187.

18. Davis, *History of the Blues*, 178.

19. David Evans, "Goin' Up The Country: Blues in Texas and the Deep South," in Cohn, *Nothing But the Blues*, 80.

20. Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 61–65.

21. Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 6.

## BLUES RESOURCES

### *Museums*

Beale Street Blues Museum, Memphis, Tennessee  
Chicago Blues Museum, Chicago, Illinois  
Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, Mississippi  
Experience Music Museum, Seattle, Washington  
Highway 61 Blues Museum, Leland, Mississippi  
R&B Museum, Memphis, Tennessee  
Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio  
Stax Museum, Memphis, Tennessee  
Texas Music Museum, Austin, Texas

### *Web Sites*

<http://www.alabamablues.org>  
<http://www.bluesdatabase.com>  
<http://www.bluesland.net>  
<http://www.blues101.org>  
<http://www.bluesrevue.com>  
<http://www.kingsbiscuittime.com/magazine>  
<http://www.livingblues.com>  
<http://musicmoz.org>  
<http://www.nothinbutdablues.com>  
<http://www.realbluesmagazine.com>  
<http://www.texasmusicmuseum.org>

## ***Magazines***

*Big Road Blues*  
*BlueSpeak*  
*Blues Revue*  
*King Biscuit Time*  
*Living Blues*  
*Real Blues*  
*Texas Blues*

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## Jazz: An American Art Form

*Ronald C. McCurdy*

Jazz music, a uniquely American art form, evolved in specific cultural, social, and historical circumstances. Although African Americans were the primary architects of this music, people of all walks of life and various ethnicities have added to the body of work we call jazz. Jazz music directly evolved from the blues, especially in the area of instrumental performances, which are derived from the vocal practices found in the blues. Some of these practices include scooping, sliding, whining, growling, and playing in the upper register. In jazz performance, the artist is just as important as the composer. The intent is for the artist to place a personal “stamp” on each performance. Jazz music is an amalgamation of both European and African performance practices.<sup>1</sup> The harmonic and formal structures of jazz are closely related to that of European styles. For example, the 12-bar blues or the AABA 32-bar structure are symmetrical forms similar to Western art traditions. This kind of formal symmetry does not exist in African genres of music. Many of the harmonic principles found in Western art traditions are also part of the harmonic structures prominent in jazz compositions.

The tonal system in Western art traditions (i.e., intervals of half-steps and whole-steps and major and minor tonalities) are also part of the systems found in jazz composition and performance. The primary difference is that jazz has its own vocabulary, language, nuances, and syntax. It relies heavily on the oral tradition.<sup>2</sup> Even though there is sometimes a written score, the artist is expected to understand and interpret the notation in such a manner as will allow a higher degree of jazz authenticity to exist during the performance. Jazz relies on “call and response” as a means of creating tension and release within the ensemble. One of the most important elements of jazz is improvisation. This is the opportunity for the artist to spontaneously compose melodies while engaged in performance. The artist is expected to improvise in tandem with other musicians. In effect, the artist is engaging in a sort of musical conversation. In many examples,

the melodies in jazz serve as a launching pad for the improvisations. Improvisation was the opportunity for musicians to personalize music by making individual statements. A skilled improviser, like a skilled writer, painter, or dancer, is able to create art that resonates with an audience.

It is important to note that jazz did not miraculously appear. Like other genres of music, it evolved from earlier forms of music. As mentioned earlier, jazz is a direct descendent of the blues. As time has passed, the genre of jazz has evolved to become world music. It is not uncommon to travel almost anywhere in the world and hear jazz music or jazz-influenced music. In order to fully understand the evolution of jazz, we must examine the genesis of this music and the circumstances that allowed jazz to be born in America.

### AFRICAN TRADITIONS

In order to have a clearer understanding of the origin of jazz, we need to revisit Africa. In examining the functions of music in African society, we will be able to see some of the parallels of how jazz evolved once the slave trade started in the Americas—particularly in North America. Most African slaves were transported to America beginning in 1619 and came primarily from the West Coast of Africa. This region was known as the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, and the Slave Coast. Some of the tribes included the Fanti, Ashanti, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and many others.<sup>3</sup> In West Africa, music was a part of everyday life. Music, dance, and poetry were inextricably connected. Everyone sang, danced, and was engaged in poetry. The idea of a separation between audience and performer did not exist. Songs were designed for all segments of society and for various occasions, including hunting, fighting, and harvesting crops. There were songs sung by men, by women, and by children. Songs existed for religious purposes, to celebrate the birth of children, and for marriages and funerals. Music was used for litigation.<sup>4</sup> Professional musicians known as griots recounted the deeds of royalty within each tribe through song and poetry. Because African society depended upon oral tradition, nothing was written down. The griots performed extemporaneously. Usually, these skills were passed from one generation to the next.

If we compare the performance practices of Western art traditions, we see value placed on the idea of authorship or composition, and an emphasis on a finished product rather than on a continuously evolving tradition. The artist is expected to interpret what is written on the musical score without any deviation. There are opportunities for subtle interpretations, but the Western tradition expects the original composition to remain intact. In African traditions, one of the most important aspects of performance practice is the improvisational nature of the performance. This is where we are



able to view some of the initial parallels between African and jazz performance practices. As in jazz performance (in both forms), the African musician always personalizes the performance. Regardless of the composer, the performer's task is to tell his or her story, thus making each performance unique.

Another very important aspect of African music is the strong correlation with language. Because most African languages are tonal, whatever can be verbalized can also be played on the drums. A slight alteration in pitch can alter the meaning of certain words. This became one of the major reasons that American slaves were denied access to drums during the colonial period, prompted by fears of their ability to communicate through drumming. Slave masters feared insurrections and felt that the less communication among slaves, the better.

As we further examine the instruments employed in Africa, we can once again draw parallels between African instruments and how some evolved into equipment used by modern jazz musicians. Four primary categories of African instruments existed: membranophones (drums made of animal skin), idiophones (bells, shakers, rattles), aerophones (wind instruments, elephant tusks), and chordophones (string instruments).<sup>5</sup> All these instruments helped Africans to communicate musically. Perhaps the most important ingredient of this music is its rhythmic complexity, known as polyrhythms, or the layering of two or more rhythms to create what is known as syncopation (the deliberate interruption of the rhythmic pulse). A perfect modern-day example is rap or hip-hop music. Without syncopation, the music of Kanye West, P-Diddy, or 50 Cent could not exist. Again, we are able to observe some musical parallels as we move toward the beginnings of jazz.

## AFRICANS AND THE PRE-CIVIL WAR PERIOD

The pre-Civil War period was a critical time for the development of African music in America. We know that slavery was nothing new to the Americas—slaves were brought to the West Indies and South America. The transportation of slaves from West Africa to the Americas begs the question why jazz developed in the United States instead of in other regions of the world? What unique feature of the experiences in the United States allowed jazz to develop?

For years scholars have attempted to answer this question. Perhaps the most compelling explanation came from author Ernest Borneman, who explains a dichotomy in the transformation process of African music in the new world. Borneman states that during the fifteenth century, Britain had no slavery and no understanding of the Greek or Roman concepts of slavery. During the sixteenth century, the Mediterranean people had a place in their society for slavery, but the British had none. Spanish and

Portuguese slave owners assumed that slavery only affected the body of the slave—not the mind. The British, on the other hand, found slavery morally indefensible and thus decided that slaves must be inferior and subhuman. Borneman contends that the dynamics of slavery under Spanish control demanded less drastic changes, thus allowing slaves to continue many of their tribal customs, including music. British control, which dehumanized the African slave, made change and the need for code languages necessary, creating an opportunity for jazz music to manifest itself.<sup>6</sup>

One of the early manifestations of this code language was the spiritual. Several religious groups took a special interest in saving the souls of the African slaves and Native Americans. Such groups as the Catholics, Moravians, Quakers, and Methodists attempted to convert slaves to Christianity. Slaves embraced the notion of Christianity largely because they could relate to many of the stories from the Old Testament of the Bible, particularly those that spoke of Moses fleeing Pharaoh's army. They saw themselves in a similar oppressed predicament. As part of this religious conversion came the Spiritual, which had a dual function: (1) praising God and (2) planning for escapes from the harsh brutality of the plantation.

Spirituals were part of a larger genre known as Slave songs. These songs are considered folk music, indicating their lack of designated composers. These Slave songs were at times religious and at others secular. One of the most important performance practices in spirituals was the element of improvisation, which made each performance different.

A very charismatic preacher named Rev. Richard Allen (founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church) was able to improvise and create spirituals extemporaneously. Rev. Allen also created what were called wandering refrains, allowing members of his congregation to improvise certain aspects of the performance.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, these techniques were precursors to jazz performance.

On the secular side, slaves spent part of their leisure time dancing. This is important because jazz's most popular period saw a strong connection between music and dance. Because drumming was outlawed, particularly in southern states, the slaves compensated by creating rhythms through hand clapping and foot stomping. However, one location in New Orleans, called Place Congo Square, allowed slaves to drum and dance, assembling and practicing their traditional dances, singing and playing their percussion instruments. This practice continued until the Civil War.<sup>8</sup>

## **RAGTIME AND BLUES: PRECURSORS OF JAZZ**

Toward the end of the nineteenth century a new piano style began to emerge: ragtime. It evolved from songs, dances, and marches brought to America by European immigrants.<sup>9</sup> In 1897, Thomas Turpin published

Harlem Rag, the first rag published by an African American. This was a major event, one of the first times an African American composer actually notated his compositions, originally intended for dancing and entertainment, allowing them to later evolve into occasions for listening.<sup>10</sup> Although Scott Joplin is credited as the father of ragtime, others played this music before Joplin published “Maple Leaf Rag” in 1899. Joplin’s compositions were known as “classic ragtime.”

This is one of the first examples of the fusing of African American elements and European forms and techniques. Piano rag is a multisectional form usually consisting of sixteen measures in each section, called “strains” or “themes.” Some of the most common forms were ABAC, ABACB, and ABCD (each letter denotes a section or theme).<sup>11</sup> The score was to be performed as written but did, however, employ the syncopated rhythms that would later be associated with jazz.

One of the most prominent ragtime pianists of the early twentieth century was the self-proclaimed inventor of jazz, Ferdinand Morton (better known as Jelly Roll Morton). Morton and his band, the Red Hot Peppers, helped to shift the ragtime style closer to a contemporary jazz style by making improvisation a major part of their performance practice. Unlike the rigid and exactly composed rags of Joplin, Morton often improvised sections of his rags.

## **ADDITIONAL PIANO STYLES/STRIDE PIANO**

One of the piano styles that was a continuation of ragtime was known as stride piano. This style was played primarily by a group of New York (Harlem)–based pianists. Some of the most notable pianists, or “ticklers,” were James P. Johnson, Willie “The Lion” Smith, Eubie Blake, and, later, Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie. Stride piano evolved effortlessly from a group of East Coast ragtime piano players.<sup>12</sup>

The main characteristic of stride piano is its “oom-pah” sound. The left hand plays a single note in the lower register of the piano on the first and third beats (the “oom”). The chords are played in the middle register on beats two and four, also by the left hand. The left hand functions much as it does in ragtime, but from the right hand greater virtuosity is expected, playing looser melodic figures. The stride pianists were able to play long variations on popular tunes of the day, as well as original compositions.

## **RENT PARTIES**

One early practice in Harlem that provided performance venues for stride pianists, in addition to bars and sporting houses (brothels), was an event called a rent party. These were gatherings at the apartments of individuals

having challenges paying their monthly rent. The tenant invited a pianist and charged admission, earning enough money to pay the rent for the month. Often, two or more pianists would attend and engage in a “cutting” contest, a friendly competition to judge the best player in the group.

James P. Johnson seldom, if ever, lost a cutting contest. Johnson recorded “Carolina Shout” in 1921, one of the most influential recordings for the next generation of young piano players, most notably Duke Ellington, who first learned to play “Carolina Shout” note for note from the first version recorded on a piano roll by Johnson in 1918. Similarly, Thomas “Fats” Waller also learned “Carolina Shout” and even had the courage to perform this composition for Johnson upon their first meeting. Waller would become one of Johnson’s most prized protégés. Beyond his clowning and showmanship, he was a flawless technician and prolific composer, author of such hits as “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” “Honeysuckle Rose,” and “Jitterbug Waltz.”

Johnson too, had his share of well-known classics. His most popular composition was “The Charleston,” which helped create a dance craze that swept the country. Johnson devoted much of his time to composing works in the classical genre as well (his composition “Yamekraw” premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1928). Despite his versatility as a composer and pianist, Johnson continues to be known as the Father of Stride.<sup>13</sup>

## BOOGIE-WOOGIE

The next piano style to emerge had elements of both ragtime and stride piano. This style was known as boogie-woogie and was characterized by an ostinato (repeated) pattern in the left hand accompanied by melodic figures played in the right. Clarence “Pine Top” Smith is credited as the innovator of this style. Boogie-woogie was usually part of the arsenal of gifted piano players, but was seldom the only style played by any pianist. Smith recorded only twice, but his version of “Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie” became part of the standard jazz repertoire.<sup>14</sup> Many well-known jazz pianists employed this style at one time or another. Count Basie, Fats Waller, and Mary Lou Williams are a few who made this part of their performance. Other boogie-woogie piano players included Jimmy Yancey, Meade Lux Lewis, Cripple Clarence Lofton, and Albert Ammons. This style continued during the rock ‘n’ roll period, played such artists as Fats Domino and Little Richard.

## BEBOP PIANO

Piano playing changed dramatically during the bebop era (c. 1945–1955). Few of the elements of ragtime, stride, and boogie-woogie existed in this new style. Basie and Earl “Fatha” Hines had begun to initiate the transition of the formerly rigid left hand into a new role known as “comping” (accompanying).

It is important to note that the previous styles had seen the piano functioning as a solo instrument filling the role of an entire orchestra. This new style, however, usually saw the piano played within the context of a rhythm section (combining piano, bass, and drums). The role once executed by the left hand in ragtime, stride, and boogie-woogie was now played by the bass. The driving rhythms were now provided by the drums. Tad Dameron, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell were the three innovators of the bebop style—Powell developed a style allowing the right hand to engage in long scale-like improvisations as the left hand continued to comp.<sup>15</sup>

## THE BLUES

While ragtime was in vogue, blues was also developing in America. Blues emerged from spirituals, work songs, and field hollers, which were sung as solos, sometimes accompanied and sometimes not. Although this blues style was being performed by bluesmen all throughout the South, W. C. Handy is credited as the father of the blues, because he was among the first to notate his compositions.

Handy's "Memphis Blues," published in September 23, 1912, created a large market for this style of music as well as awareness that the traditions of the blues were well intact.<sup>16</sup> This was the first time that the music had had a commercial aspect. The early bluesmen performed in the same manner as those who had been enslaved fifty years earlier, singing for the personal gratification. No monetary compensation was attached to their performance prior to the publishing of the compositions of Handy and others of the era.

One such artist was Huddie Ledbetter (1885?–1949), known as "Leadbelly." Leadbelly spent most of his life in and out of prison. In 1918, he served a thirty-five-year sentence in Texas's Sugar Land Penitentiary, for murder. He was able to forge a kind of friendship with the warden and later the governor. While in prison, Leadbelly constantly sang songs that resonated with his fellow inmates and prison guards. He was often given the opportunity to provide music (work songs) as the other prisoners engaged in physical labor. His music was so well received that the governor shortened his sentence, releasing him from prison in 1925. He found himself back in prison in 1932, this time in Louisiana's Angola State Penitentiary, for attempted murder. Leadbelly was introduced to the folklorists John and Alan Lomax, who visited prisons looking for folk songs. Lomax was able to intercede on Leadbelly's behalf and in 1934 was once again released from prison. Lomax served as a kind of manager for Leadbelly, arranging concerts for him. Leadbelly toured with Woody Guthrie, Josh White, and Big Bill Broonzy and served as a musical influence to a series of younger bluesmen, including Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Leadbelly, who seemed to always find trouble, returned to prison on at least two more occasions. Once released, he resumed his concert schedule.

Huddie William Ledbetter, aka Leadbelly, circa 1930s.



*Photofest*

Although a series of serendipitous circumstances allowed Leadbelly to parlay his musical talents into commerce, the important point is that Leadbelly initially performed for himself, for personal gratification. Potential for income was not the original reason he initially sang.<sup>17</sup>

### **COUNTRY/RURAL BLUES SINGERS**

One of the most creative blues artists of the early twentieth century was Robert Johnson. The contributions of Robert Johnson were extremely important because of the influences he would have on the development of

what would become jazz. The first country blues singers were men who were itinerant musicians from the South and Southwest.<sup>18</sup> Johnson and many of his contemporaries were similar to the African griots: storytellers. They sang about the challenges of their era: relationships, chain gangs, oppression. Not all their songs were negative; some told of good times and the lighter moments of life. Many of the songs were composed spontaneously.

Distinct differences emanated from various locations of the country. Texas Blues, Blues of the Mississippi Delta, and Blues of the Carolina Piedmont all had different qualities, but their common denominator is that they all reflected black culture from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>19</sup>

The 12-bar blues form was established during this period, later becoming a very important formula practiced by all subsequent jazz bands. The same 12-bar blues performed by Johnson can be heard by such musicians as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Chick Webb, and Jimmy Lunceford even up to modern times (such as by Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra). The 12-bar blues was not limited to only jazz bands. This formula also found its way into the Rhythm and Blues styles of the 1950s. The music of Little Richard, Fats Domino, and many others relied heavily on the blues progression that Robert Johnson helped to create.

One of the most well known compositions by Robert Johnson is “Hellhound on my Trail.” This composition, and others by Johnson, helped to transform the blues into an art form. The vocal lyrics help us better understand the form of the blues. The melodic and textural structure uses AAB.<sup>20</sup> Notice how the lyric is repeated by both A sections, with the “punch-line” representing B:

“Hellhound on my Trail”

I got to keep movin’, Blues fallin’ down like hail.

I got to keep movin’, Blues fallin’ down like hail.

I can’t keep no money, with a hellhound on my trail

## URBAN/CLASSIC BLUES SINGERS

This style of blues was dominated by women. The earliest documented recording was made by Mamie Smith in 1920. Smith recorded “Crazy Blues” and “It’s Right Here for You.” This landmark recording set the stage for additional recordings when the financial potential of catering to a black demographic became apparent.

In 1921, the OKeh Record label was formed, beginning a phenomenon known as race records. Clarence Williams, a music director, was dispatched to seek and record the best black talent available. Later that year, Louis

Armstrong, King Oliver, Alberta Hunter, Trixie Smith, Ethel Waters, and many others were recorded for the Okeh label.

One of the most prominent early blues women was Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (1886–1937). She was known as the “Mother of the Blues.” She had been performing long before the Okeh Record label emerged but became a very popular artist for the label. She sang in a series of tent shows during the first decade of the twentieth century and was active in vaudeville shows as well. Rainey was a star long before she recorded in 1923.

The “Empress of the Blues” is Bessie Smith (1894–1937), who toured with “Ma” Rainey, influenced by her performance. Smith’s early recordings “Down Hearted Blues” and “Gulf Coast Blues” sold over a million copies within a year. Smith was very prolific as a recording artist and performed from 1923–1931. Smith also played a featured role in the film reel of *St. Louis Blues*. Unfortunately, Smith and other artists were routinely taken advantage of by the record labels, and Smith never received the kind of financial prosperity she deserved.

A host of several blues women made significant contributions to the lexicon of blues music. Such artists as Lucille Hegamin (1894–1970), Alberta Hunter (1895–1984), Victoria “Queen” Spivey (1906–1976), and Beulah “Sippie” Wallace (1898–1986) were all important artists of the period. Each had a very distinctive sound that allowed her individuality to be heard.<sup>21</sup>

## THE JAZZ VOCALIST

Jazz emanated primarily from a vocal style in which the voice was the initial instrument. Vocal scoops, bends, growls, slurs, and other nuances were later imitated by instrumentalists. The singing styles that existed in slave songs and later in blues and gospel would serve as precursors to the ways that jazz vocalists expressed themselves.

Perhaps the first and most significant jazz vocalist was not really a vocalist at all. Louis Armstrong recorded some of jazz history’s most important and innovative records with his Hot Five and Hot Seven bands (1925–1928). Some jazz scholars relegate Armstrong to being merely an entertainer by 1930 because of his perceived lack of continued artistic growth. By 1930, he was considered a trumpet virtuoso. He had extended the range of the trumpet, had developed a unique style of jazz phrasing, and had influenced practically every jazz artist (both vocal and instrumental) of his era.<sup>22</sup>

Eleanora Fagan Gough, or Billie Holiday (1915?–1959), is one of the enduring voices in jazz history. Holiday had one of the most turbulent lives imaginable, including sexual abuse as a child, prostitution, and addiction to drugs and alcohol. In 1927, Holiday moved to New York, where she spent the next three years as a prostitute. She began singing in nightclubs



Ella Fitzgerald performing at the Savoy Ballroom in 1940.



*Photofest*

in 1930, earning fifty-seven cents each night. She continued singing in Harlem until she was discovered by jazz impresario John Hammond, who arranged for a recording session with Benny Goodman in 1933. Over a six-year period, Holiday recorded more than eighty recordings with Hammond at the helm. Holiday joined Basie's band in 1937, where she met and maintained a friendship with tenor saxophonist Lester Young. She sang with Basie's band for one year before joining Artie Shaw's band, which, too, proved a short and difficult stint. She was the first black singer to tour the South with a white band.

In 1939, Holiday introduced two signature songs that helped define her artistic career: "Strange Fruit," a song that spoke of the lynching of African Americans, and "God Bless the Child," almost a personal commentary on her own life. Holiday was not blessed with a powerful or acrobatic voice, but she was able to deliver a song honestly and heartwrenchingly.<sup>23</sup> Holiday married and divorced three times, each time to an abusive, drug-addicted man. She spent eight months in prison for drug possession, only to resume her singing career and drug use after her release. Holiday's continued practices of self-abuse finally caught up with her, and she died in 1959 at the presumed age of 44.<sup>24</sup>

Ella Fitzgerald (1918–1996) has been considered a jazz vocalist extraordinaire. When Ella began singing with Chick Webb's band in the mid-1930s, her career gained momentum. Chick served as Ella's mentor for

their short time together. Chick passed away by 1939, and his band was renamed Ella Fitzgerald and her Famous Band. Ella's range, flexibility, and clarity have been the standard by which all other jazz vocalists have been measured. In this area, she has no peers. Ella's improvisations were as fluent and inventive as any instrumentalist's. She had tremendous instincts for melody, phrasing, and harmony and recorded for the Decca label for 22 years.<sup>25</sup>

In 1938, Ella recorded "A Tisket, A Tasket," which proved to be a huge hit for her. In the mid-1940s, she met Norman Grantz, who created the Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts. These concerts led to a series of recordings that paid homage to American songwriters who included George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Hoagy Carmichael, and Duke Ellington.

In 1986, Ella underwent quadruple bypass heart surgery. During the surgery, it was discovered that she was diabetic, something that led to Ella's poor eyesight. Because of her poor circulation, both her legs had to be amputated below the knees. On June 15, 1996, Ella passed away. She had made over 200 recordings and had appeared in Carnegie Hall more than twenty-five times, leaving behind her a body of work that will probably never be surpassed.

## **EARLY NEW ORLEANS JAZZ**

New Orleans was one of the most culturally diverse and complex cities in North America during the colonial period. It was a major port of entry for goods and materials, fueling the economy at that time. The city was founded in 1718 as part of the French colony. In 1763, Spain took control, and by 1803, France was owner of the territory once more. Later that year, France sold the colony to the United States in what was called the Louisiana Purchase.

The dynamic in New Orleans was quite different from the rest of the country. Central to New Orleans was the Creole culture, which was Catholic and French-speaking. The entire region was much more liberal when it came to accepting a variety of cultures blended together. In addition, European influences were joined by a strong West African presence.

By the eighteenth century, people of African descent (both free and enslaved), made up half of the city's population. There were individuals from the West Indies and the Caribbean Islands. As the numbers of black Americans increased in New Orleans, so did the variety of music. Blacks brought with them their blues, religious music, and dances to add to the mix of an already vibrant musical culture in New Orleans. One very important part of the culture was the emergence of a segment of the population known as Creoles of color, people of mixed African and European blood. Most were educated and very astute in business and many were formally

Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong.

*Photofest*

trained musically, performing in some of the best professional orchestras in New Orleans.

An example of New Orleans's influence on jazz and ragtime is evidenced by the use of syncopation in early New Orleans brass bands. Marching bands became a big part of the culture as a result of the military bands. Blacks begin to form their own brass bands, which participated in a variety of community activities, including funerals and Mardi Gras celebrations.<sup>26</sup> The “front line” in the brass band consisted of the trumpet, trombone, and clarinet. The trumpet usually played the melody and the trombone and clarinet the countermelody. The “back line” consisted of the banjo, drums, basses, and guitar, functioning as the rhythm section.<sup>27</sup> Collective improvisation became a main characteristic of the performance and created a polyrhythmic effect in which all the “front line” instruments played simultaneously, a practice that disappeared over time in trends toward more modern jazz styles.

Early in the twentieth century, New Orleans had become a major sea and river port and was active in the entertainment area as well. All kinds of theaters and vaudeville acts made the city their home, and the music publishing business was also thriving. Illegitimate businesses were found in the

red-light district near Canal and Rampart Street. The shores of Lake Ponchartrain were a site where bands competed for audiences at amusement parks and resorts; there were always opportunities for dancing.

A more “earthy” style of dancing became popular in New Orleans in dances done mostly by blacks. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, musicians who could not read music began playing more improvisational music for dances and other occasions. One of the best-known cornet players who began to incorporate improvisation into his music was Charles “Buddy” Bolden. Bolden proved to be a transitional figure as jazz grew in popularity and other musicians began imitating some of his techniques.<sup>28</sup>

Segregation laws were passed to retaliate against Reconstruction in the 1890s, increasing the amount of discrimination against anyone of African ancestry in New Orleans. That discrimination was extended to Creoles of color as well. Any previous accommodations they had enjoyed were no longer an option.

In many ways, this collective discrimination against anyone with black blood ultimately strengthened the musical bond between the Creoles of color and blacks. Because of this bond, blacks were now privy to the kind of formal training that many of the Creoles of Color had enjoyed for years. This proved a means for improving the overall musicality of blacks. Several major artists developed their skills while growing up in New Orleans. During the first decade of the twentieth century, trumpeter Freddie Keppard was the featured soloist with the Original Creole Orchestra.

An all-white group of musicians who called themselves the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded the first commercially successful jazz recording in 1917.<sup>29</sup> The “Livery Stable Blues,” which Nick La Rocca claimed to have composed, was more a novelty composition than an actual jazz composition. The trumpet and clarinet imitated barnyard animal sounds, which generated tremendous enthusiasm from the public. Very soon, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was touring the world playing their brand of jazz.<sup>30</sup>

The popularity jazz was now receiving provided opportunities for several black artists to leave New Orleans to tour nationally and internationally. The list of very innovative artists who hailed from New Orleans included clarinetists Sidney Bechet and Johnny Dodds, drummer Baby Dodds, trombonist Edward “Kid” Ory, and cornetist Joe “King” Oliver.

Perhaps the most innovative jazz figure of the first two decades of the twentieth century was Louis Armstrong. Armstrong grew up poor in New Orleans. His mother was a part-time prostitute, and he never had much of a relationship with his father. As a young boy, Armstrong was sent to the Waifs Home for Boys for allegedly shooting a gun in public. While in reform school, he was given his first music lessons. After a year, he was released and began doing odd jobs around New Orleans. King Oliver befriended Armstrong and helped develop his skills as a trumpeter.

Armstrong later joined King Oliver and his Creole Band. The band included Honore Dutrey on trombone, Lil Harding on piano, Bill Johnson on banjo, Baby Dodds on drums, Johnny Dodds on clarinet, and King Oliver on cornet. Upon the closing of Storyville in 1917, many jazz artists began to tour nationally and internationally. Oliver moved to Chicago and summoned Louis Armstrong in 1922. This stint with Oliver's band lasted until 1924. Armstrong teamed with Lil Harding (whom Armstrong married in 1925) to form two major bands that would establish Armstrong's legacy as a jazz artist. The bands were known as the Hot Five and Hot Seven (1925–1928) and were commercially successful and popular. These bands were the best example of New Orleans–style performance. Johnny Dodds, on clarinet, was in a class by himself, and Kid Ory was a superb technician as well.

Armstrong was able to transform the way jazz was performed and extended the range of the trumpet. Armstrong was innovative with a technique known as “scat singing,” an improvisation technique that used nonsense syllables. This would be a technique that jazz vocalists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Joe Williams, Mel Torme, and many others would embrace.<sup>31</sup> “West End Blues” is an example of Armstrong's brilliance as a trumpet player. The introduction, by Armstrong, one of the classic trumpet solos in jazz history, demonstrates Armstrong's extensive range and flexibility. The brass bands suggested the beginnings of an ensemble sound that would begin in the 1920s with the big bands. Bandleaders such as Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Chick Webb, and many others furthered the concept of ensemble playing in an era known as the Swing Era.

## THE SWING ERA (ca. 1930–1945)

The collapse of the stock market in 1929 did not have an immediate affect on jazz in America. Eventually, bands that had worked regularly found themselves out of work; but America was moving toward another style of music that involved dancing. The Roseland Ballroom and Savoy Ballroom were two major venues where literally thousands of young people could be found on any given night dancing to the big band sounds of the period. The Swing Era was the most popular period in jazz's history. In short, jazz was the pop music of its era. There were more people dancing and listening to jazz on the radio than ever before—or since.

The ensembles grew from quintets and septets to what were called “big bands,” consisting of fifteen to twenty pieces in some instances. These ensembles generally consisted of three to five saxophones, three or four trumpets, and three or four trombones, as well as a rhythm section composed of a piano, a string bass, drums, and a guitar. The clarinet and tuba, once part of New Orleans ensembles, were replaced by the saxophone and

acoustic bass, respectively. Because of the number of musicians who were now receiving formal education in music, the level of technical proficiency improved exponentially. The tempos became much faster, and the tone quality and pitch accuracy also improved. Instead of improvising freely through many of the New Orleans compositions, the Swing Era presented full elaborate arrangements as the standard.

One very important figure who helped to establish the configuration of what would be known as the big bands was Fletcher Henderson. He and his co-arranger Don Redman organized the big band, establishing the independence of each section within the band (i.e., saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and rhythm sections). This set the standard that big bands would emulate throughout jazz history in a configuration that continues even today.<sup>32</sup> White bandleaders such as Guy Lombardo and Paul Whiteman presented a combination of popular songs and quasi-classical works before the public.<sup>33</sup>

The most popular white leader of a big band was Benny Goodman, who was known as the “King of Swing.” Goodman was part of the Austin High Gang, a group of young high school students who took a special interest in jazz. That group included Gene Krupa, Jimmy McPartland, Frank Teschmacher, Bud Freeman, Dave Tough, and Muggsy Spanier.<sup>34</sup> Goodman had a long and successful career as a jazz clarinetist. (In addition to being an exceptional jazzist, he also played classical music.)

In 1938, Goodman took his integrated band to perform in Carnegie Hall. This was a historic event, for America was still very much a segregated society. The band members were Lionel Hampton on vibraphone, Teddy Wilson on piano, and Gene Krupa on drums. In 1935, Goodman was leading his own band, playing several arrangements by Fletcher Henderson that helped propel his commercial success. He also was able to infuse black musical sensibilities into a white big band. The jazz impresario John Hammond was now backing Goodman’s band, which led to appearances on NBC’s three-hour program, “Let’s Dance.” That same year, Goodman enjoyed success performing at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles.

As mentioned, the Swing Era was the most popular time in history for jazz music. Jazz was the pop music of the day in the 1930s. Black bands also benefited from dance music’s surge in popularity, and several black bands enjoyed success. Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, Chick Webb, Benny Moten, and Jimmy Lunceford were among some of the more successful black bandleaders of the day. Sy Oliver served as the principle arranger for Lunceford’s band; he, like Henderson and Redman, possessed a formally trained approach for arrangement and composition that made his arrangements very sophisticated and well received by audiences all over the country. The driving four-beat rhythm, the fast, danceable tempos, and the strong ensemble shout choruses were the hallmark of what made the swing era big bands so exciting.

Two of the most popular and most successful swing bands were the Count Basie and Duke Ellington Orchestras. Both bandleaders lived long, fruitful lives and made significant contributions to the body of literature in the band genre. They both had careers that lasted more than fifty years. Each band had its own distinctive sound and style—both resonated with the jazz listeners and dancers.

William Basie (1904–1984) was born in Redbank, NJ. He studied piano from his mother and from a German lady named Holloway. Basie initially wanted to be a drummer but early on found the piano and organ his instruments of choice. When Basie finally got to Harlem, he heard pianist Fats Waller. They became fast friends, and Waller showed Basie the stride piano style and how to “swing.” A stint at the Roseland Ballroom, arranged by John Hammond, helped launch Basie’s popularity. It was around this time that his band was known as the Big Swing Machine. In 1937, Basie assembled for his first recording some of the top jazzmen of the day. Among the many vocalists who sang with Basie’s band, vocalist Jimmy Rushing, also known as “Mr. Five by Five” because of his girth, was one of the most distinctive voices ever to perform with the Basie Orchestra.<sup>35</sup>

**Count Basie and his band, circa 1940s.**



*Photofest*

The Basie band evolved over the years and employed some of the most noted musicians in the country. Basie developed and launched the careers of many future jazz stars. Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Marshall Royal, Ernie Wilkins, Ben Webster, Chu Berry, Don Byas, Buddy Tate, Frank Foster, and Frank Wess were among some of the noted saxophone players. Some of the brass players included Buck Clayton, Oran "Hot Lips" Page, Harry "Sweets" Edison, Clark Terry, Thad Jones, Dickey Wells, J. J. Johnson, and Benny Morton. The rhythm sections included such names as Jo Jones, Walter Page, and Freddie Green. Even though Basie passed away in 1984, the Basie band continues even today, and the same musical concepts still exist.

One of the stylistic characteristics of the Basie band was known as a riff style, in which a two-measure musical motive becomes the melodic material for a composition. Many of the compositions were steeped in the 12-bar blues progression. One of the most well-known compositions to employ the riff style is "One O'Clock Jump." Other compositions that exemplify Basie's driving style include "Doggin' Around," "Taxi War Dance," and "Lester Leaps In," three recordings featuring Lester Young.<sup>36</sup>

Count Basie led his band for more than forty years. Around 1950, Basie discovered that he was the victim of poor management. His managers were profiting from Basie's talents but thrusting him into more debt and into troubles with the IRS. From that moment on, Basie made attempts to take control of his financial destiny. He began to make better choices in his hires for his band, and he gave up alcohol and cigarettes in 1960. He suffered a heart attack in 1977 and was diagnosed with spinal arthritis and confined to a wheelchair. Basie continued to perform and travel with his band until he was hospitalized in 1984, soon after passing away, on April 26, 1984.

The other major big bandleader of the swing era was Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899–1974). Ellington was born into a middle-class family in Washington, D.C., on April 19, 1899. Ellington grew up in a household maintained by his mother while his father was a butler for a wealthy Washington family. The family in which Edward and his younger sister grew up was a religious one.

Even as a child, Ellington carried himself with a certain degree of confidence that caused one family member to call him Duke. The name stuck, and he kept it throughout his life. Ellington's first love as a child was baseball, but his mother decided that piano lessons would be a good idea. Like many kids, Ellington resisted and was less than studious when it came to preparing for his lessons. As Ellington entered his teens, he heard a pianist named Harvey Brooks who introduced Ellington to the music of James P. Johnson. Ellington learned to play Johnson's "Carolina Shout."<sup>37</sup> When Ellington also realized that the piano was somewhat of a magnet for girls,



he became even more serious about honing his craft. He began playing for school dances and other occasions around Washington, D.C. Even at a young age, Ellington demonstrated a keen eye for business. Another one of Ellington's talents was painting and drawing: instead of paying a manager to book his gigs, he began booking himself and painting signs advertising his own performances and availability.

After a few failed attempts to relocate to New York beginning in 1922, Ellington finally returned to New York in 1926 with a four-year performance stint at the Kentucky Club. Some of Ellington's early sidemen included Sonny Greer on drums, Otto Hardwick on saxophone, Arthur Whetsol on trumpet, and Elmer Snowden on guitar. It was during the Kentucky Club engagement that Ellington met a young impresario named Irvin Mills.

Mills became Ellington's manager. Mills (who was white) was able to book Ellington's band into venues to which most other black bands were denied access. Ellington's band was listed on various record labels as Duke Ellington (Victor), The Jungle Band (Brunswick), and the Washingtonians (Harmony).<sup>38</sup> In 1927, Mills was able to broker a deal to have the Ellington Band perform at the Cotton Club. On December 24, 1927, Ellington opened for what would be a nearly five-year engagement at the Cotton Club.

**Duke Ellington (seated) and members of his famous Ellington Orchestra.**



*Photofest*

This arrangement was to last from 1927–1932. During the Cotton Club engagement, Ellington and his musicians served as the house band for the club. The band's duties included backing up singers, tap dancers, and chorus girls. The Cotton Club was a venue operated by gangster Owney Madden during Prohibition. All the musicians and other entertainers were black. The dancing girls, although black, were required to pass the "brown paper bag test": if their hue was darker than a brown paper bag, they were not allowed to dance at the Cotton Club, all of whose patrons were white.

One of the trademark sounds of the band was the growling trumpet. Bubba Miley was one of the first to fill that role, adding to one of the billings that advertised Duke Ellington and His Jungle Band. Later, the growling trombone sound was added by "Tricky" Sam Nanton. When Miley left the band, he was replaced by Cootie Williams. Other notable artists who were part of Ellington's band included Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, and Barney Bigard on saxophone; Juan Tizol and Lawrence Brown on trombone; Arthur Whetsol, Freddie Jenkins, and Cootie Williams on trumpets; Freddie Guy on guitar; Wellman Braud on bass; and Sonny Greer on drums. Ellington was no ordinary band leader. This nearly five-year stint in the Cotton Club proved a valuable time in Ellington's musical growth. The shows at the Cotton Club were broadcast nightly over radio in homes all across America. He also recorded several records, and the band had obtained national and international acclaim.

When Ellington's tenure at the Cotton Club ended in 1931, he was ready to move forward with more recordings and embark upon an international tour. Throughout Ellington's long career, he would be the recipient of many awards and honors. In 1969, toward the end of his life, he would be invited to perform at the White House for President Nixon. During the time spent at the Cotton Club, Ellington amassed a repertoire that allowed him to play for a variety of engagements. One composition in his repertoire became the mantra of many of the big bands. The song featured Ivie Anderson on "It Don't Mean a Thing, If It Ain't Got That Swing." One of the most distinctive aspects of Ellington's band is that he composed music to fit the abilities of his personnel.

One of Ellington's long-time collaborators was a diminutive man by the name of Billy Strayhorn. Strayhorn, hired in 1939, also played piano and once aspired to become a concert pianist. But the social climate of the time made being a concert pianist simply not an option for Strayhorn. A man of seemingly small ego, Strayhorn was content to remain in the shadows of Ellington. "Sweet Pea," as he was called by Ellington, composed many of the band's hits, including what would become one of Ellington's theme songs, "Take the A Train." Strayhorn was someone of impeccable talents. He composed the haunting ballad "Lush Life" when he was sixteen years old. Other compositions include "Chelsea Bridge" and "Upper Manhattan

Medical Group (UMMG)". Strayhorn remained with Ellington for the remainder of his life, up to his death in 1967.<sup>39</sup>

Ellington maintained a working band for nearly fifty years. At a time when America's musical tastes were shifting and all kinds of social change abounded, he managed to reinvent himself and keep his band on its feet. Over that half-century, some of the most celebrated jazz musicians were part of his band. Members included Clark Terry and Ray Nance on trumpet, Louie Bellson and Sam Woodyard on drums, Ben Webster and Paul Gonsalves on tenor saxophones, Oscar Pettiford on bass, and Jimmy Hamilton on clarinet and saxophone. Ellington composed over three thousand compositions that ranged from dance pieces, suites, and sacred music to music for television, as well as a host of other self-commissioned works.

Ellington was a tireless composer who viewed all of his compositions as works in progress. No composer since Ellington has been able to escape the influence he exerted on the development of the big band. Even while Ellington was hospitalized, only weeks before he passed away, he requested that a piano and manuscript paper be brought to his room so that he could continue to work. He worked until his death on May 24, 1974.

## BEBOP AND BEYOND

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, changed life in America drastically, summoning America into the World War II. It became difficult for musicians to travel, and younger musicians were becoming tired of playing the same arrangements in the big bands each night. The second generation of jazz musicians wanted to push the creative envelope. The style they created was called bebop. Charlie Parker, John Birks, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell were among the young lions who were pushing music forward. It was common for the musicians to meet after work at jam sessions that served as laboratories in which to incubate this new music.

Bebop-style music was quite different from big-band. Ensembles shrank from eighteen pieces to quartets and quintets, and the tempos of the compositions sped up. Harmonies became more complex and melodies more difficult to sing. The young musicians who had played in big bands for audiences who expected to hear the same arrangements (in some cases the same solos) each night were now playing for themselves. In short, jazz was becoming a connoisseur's art—which meant that jazz audiences suddenly decreased in size and appreciation. Dancing, which had been a huge part of the swing era, was prohibited by many jazz clubs. This virtuoso music in many ways was a social commentary on the disdain the musicians had for having to play music for dancing. The intent of the bebop era was to raise the artistic standards of jazz musicians.<sup>40</sup> Minton's Playhouse (an after-hours

joint in Harlem) became one of the favorite spots for the emerging music. Such tunes as “Thriving on a Riff,” “Groovin’ High,” and “Hot House” became standard tunes associated with the bebop era. The musicians enjoyed playing the popular tunes of the day, written by some of American’s most gifted composers, including Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, and George Gershwin. In almost all examples, the musicians phrased the songs differently from the originals, even composing alternate melodies over the chord progression, as when, for example, Kern’s “All the Things You Are” became “Prince Albert.” This technique is called a contrafact.<sup>41</sup> Gershwin’s music was some of the more popular embraced by jazz musicians. The chord progression for “I Got Rhythm” became a standard for jazz musicians; hundreds of compositions were written that embraced its chord progression, “Moose the Mooch,” “Shaw Nuff,” and “Thriving on a Riff” among them.

## COOL JAZZ

Early in the 1950s yet another style emerged, called cool jazz. Miles Davis, Lennie Tristano, and Stan Getz are three musicians credited with creating this new sound in jazz, considered less abrasive and more accessible to the general public.<sup>42</sup> Although dancing was not associated with this style, it seemed more inclusive to a lay audience than bebop with its slower tempos, simpler harmonies, and less fiery improvisations (though just as virtuosic).

### *Third Stream*

A byproduct of cool jazz was a style called third stream. The term was coined by composer and conductor Gunther Schuller. The style represented the fusion of classical music and jazz elements; ensembles were enlarged to include woodwinds (such as flutes and clarinets) and French horns. Charles Mingus and Teo Marcero were two of the most successful jazzists to incorporate this new style.<sup>43</sup>

## WEST COAST JAZZ

In the 1950s, a style known as west coast jazz became popular. It resembled the Capital recording sessions of Miles Davis, which included smaller ensembles—a complete trumpet or trombone section was trimmed to one trumpet and one trombone.<sup>44</sup> Some of the more successful west coast jazz musicians included Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker. Dave Brubeck also had tremendous success, especially on college campuses, with such hits as “Take Five” and “Blue Rondo Ala Turk.”

## HARD BOP

A reaction seemed to take place as each innovative style developed. The east coast musicians, mostly black, resenting what they perceived as the unemotional aspect of the mostly white west coast jazz, developed a style called hard bop. This style was more “earthy” in quality and employed melodies more accessible to listeners. Many of the tunes had a gospel-like flavor, and their harmonies were less complicated. Clifford Brown, Horace Silver, Bobby Timmons, and bandleader Art Blakey were the primary innovators of this style; “Moanin’” and “Dat Dere” were compositions that represented the hard bop style.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

During the 1950s and into the 1960s America was undergoing a radical transformation. Many of the perennial jazz icons, such as Ellington, Basie, and Dizzy (Parker died in 1955 and Clifford Brown died in 1956), were still active, though playing to much smaller audiences. Many had to reinvent themselves in an effort to remain on the scene. The civil rights movement was in full motion by the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s. Boycotts, sit-ins, and race riots had become the norm by the mid-1960s within the African American community. America was engaged in a very unpopular war, and this, coupled with civil unrest, made for an extremely turbulent time in the country. Among young kids, drugs such as LSD and marijuana accompanied the new style called rock ‘n’ roll. America’s musical taste had begun to shift. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones were two groups from England who enjoyed tremendous success in America, as did Bill Haley and His Comets and a young man from Memphis named Elvis, who would become known as the King. All of these changes in society helped create a generation gap.<sup>45</sup>

## FREE JAZZ

The turbulent times in society and within the black community were reflected in the music of the time. Free jazz, the next innovation, reflected African American discontent. Ornette Coleman is the father of free jazz. In many ways this new style rejected the traditional ways of playing jazz. Tonal centers were obscured or did not exist at all, which meant improvising on chord changes was no longer an option. Traditional forms such as the 12-bar blues and the AABA form were also obscured. One such example is a composition by Ornette Coleman called “Bird Food,” a blues-based composition that forces the 12-bar blues into an AABA format. Each of the A sections uses a symmetrical approach to the blues. The first A uses nine-and-a-half

Miles Davis on trumpet and John Coltrane on tenor saxophone in St. Louis in 1956.



*Photofest*

measures of a blues chorus, the second A is eleven measures, and the last A uses eleven measures.<sup>46</sup> This is hardly a conventional approach to composition or performance such as was embraced by artists prior to the free jazz movement. This style ventured into the realm of intellectual art music, leaving even further behind any notion of pop music that might include dancing.

Other, more traditional jazz artists begin to follow in the avant-garde style of Coleman. John Coltrane, who had played in a more conventional style with Miles Davis's Quintet of 1955 was now experimenting with free jazz. Coltrane's inclusion of Middle Eastern scales and departure from conventional formal structures and running chord changes was now the order of the day.

Coltrane's 1965 recording (two years before his death) of "A Love Supreme"<sup>47</sup> is a classic example of his artistic evolution. Other artists who embraced the free jazz movement included Don Cherry, Eric Dolphy, Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, and groups such as the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Even these were but a few of those who were striking out in new directions with jazz.

## JAZZ FUSION

The emergence of rock 'n' roll, which featured such artists as Jimi Hendrix, Three Dog Night, and many others, moved jazz into yet another direction. Miles Davis, who was never opposed to change, began experimenting in the late 1960s with a style known as jazz fusion. This style was characterized by elements of both jazz and rock. One of Miles's best-known examples was his 1969 recording of "Bitches Brew."<sup>48</sup>

Other groups, such as Weather Report, led by Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, led by John McLaughlin, represented additional examples of how jazz responded to the proliferation of other popular styles. Horn bands such as Blood, Sweat and Tears, Chicago, and Tower of Power continued to include both jazz and rock elements in their playing.

## CODA

Jazz has endured now for more than one hundred years. It has undergone a series of transformations and has been a reflection of society in all its tragedies and triumphs. It has been a snapshot of American society and has taught Americans how to feel, and to realize that anything is possible when the human spirit is challenged. Americans have witnessed the genius of icons such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles, and Ella Fitzgerald and seen the emergence of younger talents who continue to carry the torch, moving the music forward.

Individuals such as multi-Grammy-winning trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and his older brother Brandford have been consistent contributors to the furthering of jazz. Terence Blanchard, Roy Hargrove, Brad Meldau, Joshua Redman, and Christian McBride are among some of the younger artists who are continually making significant contributions. Since the moment

that dancing was no longer a part of jazz, it has struggled to maintain the kind of audiences it once enjoyed during the swing era of the 1930s—yet the music has endured. More individuals are playing this music in schools and youth groups all over the world than ever before. Jazz has truly become world music. It can be heard in practically every country on the globe.

Yet, despite the national and international acceptance jazz has enjoyed, it is a genre that continues to struggle financially. Jazz artists find it difficult to earn a living, and they play to relatively small audiences. But the music continues to move. Who knows what genius will emerge next? Thousands of young artists flock to New York every year to pursue their dreams.

It is likely that jazz will continue to evolve by incorporating styles from other cultures, much as Dizzy Gillespie did with the Afro Cuban movement. Continuous collaborations, much like that of Herbie Hancock and Bobby McFerrin, will continue to work with artists and genres outside the realm of jazz. Regardless of what happens, jazz will continue to move forward.

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## Superheroes and Comics

*M. Keith Booker and Terrence Tucker*

In one episode of the animated television series *The Boondocks*, young Huey Freeman, a radical African American ten-year-old, is asked what a superhero based on him would be like. They'd never base a superhero on him, he replies, because he wouldn't be commercial enough. "Besides," he goes on, "all the black superheroes are corny. They'd probably give me a metal headband and a yellow disco shirt or something stupid." The reference here is obviously to the original Luke Cage, one of the first black superheroes in the comics and one of several black superheroes to debut in the 1970s under the clear influence of the Blaxploitation movement in film. Indeed, black superheroes began to appear in any significant number only as late as the 1970s, largely the result of an effort (inspired, as was Blaxploitation film itself, by the emerging Civil Rights movement) to correct a long and baleful legacy (effectively detailed by Erik Strömberg)<sup>1</sup> in which African Americans had either been absent from the comics or depicted in largely demeaning and stereotypical ways.

Cage, who first appeared in the self-titled serial comic *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* in June 1972, is in many ways the prototypical African American superhero. Born Carl Lucas and growing up in the streets of Harlem, Lucas is wrongly convicted of murder and sent to prison, thus becoming an emblem of at least one strain in the experience of young black men in America. In prison, he undergoes still more emblematic experiences when he is abused by vicious (white) prison guards, then ultimately pressured into participating in medical experiments in the hope of receiving better treatment. When the experiment goes wrong (sabotaged by one of the prison guards), Lucas is unexpectedly given superhuman strength and toughness (the emphasis on his "skin of steel"—or "titanium" in some modes—echoes the emphasis on his skin color as an African American), which he uses to escape from prison. He then returns to Harlem determined to clear his name by tracking down his former best friend, Willis Stryker, who had framed him for murder in a dispute over a woman they

both loved. When he finds that Stryker has been killed in a dispute with rival mobsters, Lucas finds that his task is more difficult than he first expected. Noting the publicity received by other (Marvel) superheroes in the New York area, he decides to become Lucas Cage, Hero for Hire, hoping to use his powers to help him earn a living.

He is successful, though only barely: his difficult battles with a variety of supercriminals never quite earn him the fortune he had originally envisioned. Instead, he occupies a seedy office in a rundown Times Square movie theater, struggling to attract clients and eking out a living while in the meantime avoiding identification as an escaped convict. This situation places him somewhat in the situation of the hardboiled private detective, but even more in the tradition of outsider Blaxploitation heroes, such as the protagonists of the 1971 films *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*—except with superpowers. He is, however, somewhat more successful than the typical Blaxploitation hero in eventually joining the mainstream; he is eventually cleared of the original murder charge, and his exploits ultimately place him in contact with a number of other Marvel superheroes, whose circle he joins, if uneasily and marginally, now bearing the more conventional superhero name of Power Man.

Cage/Power Man was not Marvel's first African American superhero. That honor would go to The Falcon, who first began appearing in *Captain America* comics in 1969. Eventually sharing top billing in the *Captain America and The Falcon* series, The Falcon joined Captain America somewhat in the tradition of the popular interracial pairing of Bill Cosby and Robert Culp in the television show *I Spy* (1965–1968). By pairing with Captain America, the embodiment of American patriotism and nationalism, The Falcon becomes a nonthreatening figure who seeks to embrace the democratic spirit of America. He sits in the tradition of race men—Ralph Ellison, Cosby himself—who often project a racelessness that implicitly critiques the presence of Jim Crow segregation. The portrait of the Falcon finds a figure whose belief in America is so complete that it rivals Captain America's and alleviates fears of blacks as violent threats or retaliatory agents, much in the spirit of Martin Luther King's philosophy of nonviolence. Indeed, when Captain America quits out of frustration with the Watergate Scandal—the preeminent twentieth-century challenge to American idealism—Falcon not only dons the Captain America persona but eventually convinces Captain America to return. Just as Captain America's popularity is based on the promotion of American nationalism against international threat (World War II, the Cold War), the presence of the Falcon addresses anxieties about racial integration. The Falcon and his alter ego Sam "Snap" Wilson eventually come to resemble the middle-class integrationist image presented in the early years of the Civil Rights movement. This image contrasts with the working-class and underclass world of Luke Cage, the

first African American superhero with his own series, who appeared in the midst of the Black Power movement. But the initial appearance of the Falcon found him in stark contrast to the royal blood of African superheroes the Black Panther and Storm of the X-Men. As “Snap,” Sam Wilson is a thug and hustler who accidentally crashes on Exile Island and is manipulated by Captain America’s enemy, Red Skull, to become Captain America’s ideal partner and eventual destroyer. However, as Wilson takes on the Falcon identity and trains under Captain America, he eventually joins his mentor to defeat Red Skull. Ultimately, Wilson becomes a social worker in Harlem, helping its black residents locally while presenting a united racial front nationally and internationally in his partnership with Captain America. What becomes obvious in the initial and subsequent appearances of the Falcon is that Wilson does not possess the ideal characteristics that would make him a natural hero in the vein of Superman’s Clark Kent or the Black Panther’s T’Challa. Instead it is only by becoming the Falcon, erasing his past, that Wilson becomes acceptable in the Captain America universe. Thus, although the Falcon might seem to “represent the ultimate fantasy—to be endowed with incredible powers that fall literally, from the sky,” as Christopher Knowles points out,<sup>2</sup> Wilson’s former status as a hoodlum—and the stereotypical linkage of blackness to criminality—seems to make him unworthy of being a solo hero: he needs Captain America to legitimize his heroic role. Even the Black Panther’s willingness to provide the Falcon with a harness to mount his wings—a nod to the hopeful Americanization and integration of black Americans—does not result in an extended consideration of race. Despite the appearance of Luke Cage, Marvel’s *Black Goliath* (1975) was only minimally successful, as was DC Comics’ *Black Lightning* (1977), although Black Lightning demonstrates the shift in representations of African Americans that coincided with the shifting ideas of black political ideology and African Americans’ self-identification.

The politics at work in previous black superhero comics became more explicit with Black Lightning, DC’s first black superhero. Born Jefferson Pierce, Black Lightning avoids the criminal justice problems of the Falcon and Luke Cage by turning to his Olympic training to get out of the ghetto. Like those characters, however, Pierce returns to the ghetto as a teacher as an attempt to help inner-city youth. In true Blaxploitation form, Pierce becomes Black Lightning as a way to battle drug dealers, the 100 Mob. The Black Lightning series failed to last even two years, perhaps because the character moved beyond mere images of “authentic” blackness to contend with issues of race and class in ways that moved away from the Blaxploitation mode and more toward black nationalism. Black Lightning declines to join a superhero team (in this case the Justice League), because he believes they only want a token black hero. His eventual membership in the Batman-supported group the Outsiders is then in part because of their willingness

to move beyond the status quo. Moreover, *Black Lightning* highlights the eventual problem with the Blaxploitation era on which it sought to capitalize. Specifically, white conceptions of blackness frequently missed the original intent of black-authored texts such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* or the original *Shaft*. Tony Isabella, whom Braford W. Wright calls "one of the few black writers working in the field," argued that "even open-minded white writers found it difficult to portray minority characters in a way that was not offensive or patronizing."<sup>3</sup> In contrast with the liberal writers who sought to construct black superheroes in a way that made color secondary to heroism, comics featuring black superheroes in the 1970s played toward what many considered "authentic" images of African American life. Neither strategy seemed to fully capture the complexity of the characters' heroic standing—and the hope it engendered—and the reality of their lives as African Americans living in America. Perhaps the epitome of this paralysis comes in a well-known episode of the explicitly political Green Lantern comics of the 1970s (*Green Lantern* #85, 1972). After saving a slum lord from angry tenants, Green Lantern is confronted by an older African American man who demands to know why Green Lantern has failed to help African Americans in the fight against racism. Green Lantern hangs his head in shame, unable to respond. The scene reflects the paralysis of the comic book industry in attempting to balance popular/critical acclaim with nonstereotypical representations of African Americans.

Ironically, Green Lantern's negotiation of race encompasses the comic book industry's attempt to provide characters that accurately reflect multicultural American while responding to the expectations of comic book fans. Like the X-Men, the Green Lantern Corps provides an opportunity for a variety of characters to be featured, whether human, meta-human, or alien. Readers are thus allowed their choice of characters instead of being restricted to a single character, who may be loved by some readers but disliked by others. The result is the expansion of the number and face of the fan base. In the case of the X-Men, for example, the African princess Storm was complemented by anti-heroes such as Wolverine and traditional heroes such as Cyclops. Similarly, the intergalactic makeup of the Lantern Corps minimizes concerns about race through a classic science fiction technique, namely the privileging of the lives and commonalities of humanity—regardless of race—in the face of unknown aliens, galaxies, and realities. Thus, the emergence of African American architect John Stewart in January 1972 (*Green Lantern* #87) as Hal Jordan's backup does not seem to be a move that seeks to explicitly add an African American character, even though Stewart's appearance was consistent with the arrival of the Falcon and Luke Cage. Jordan, who followed the original human Green Lantern Alan Scott, was considered the most popular Green Lantern, and Stewart's connection to Jordan legitimized him in much the same way that the Falcon

*Justice League*, 2001. Shown: Green Lantern, The Flash.



*Cartoon Network/Photofest*

became accepted through his association with Captain America. Stewart appears as a working-class black very different from both Sam Wilson and Luke Cage. Although out of work from time to time, Stewart does not have a criminal background or negative experiences with the police. Stewart's devotion to his assignment as a Green Lantern—he continues to serve despite opportunities to resign—mirrors the Protestant work ethic that sits at the center of American ideals.

Unlike the Falcon, Stewart's elevation to hero status does not include an erasure of an "unworthy" past. Nor does he achieve his powers because of royal blood. Stewart appears as a man whose history, though filled with the "fantastic," is one familiar to the African American experience: the grandson of African Americans who migrated North to Detroit from Mississippi, son to a father who worked on the assembly line because of the industrial jobs African Americans were able to work, and helped as a child by an extended family that stepped in when his mother died of cancer. His refusal to wear a mask, unlike other Green Lanterns and, in fact, many superheroes, echoes a tendency within Blaxploitation films, such as *Shaft*, *Gordon's War* (1973), and *Three the Hard Way* (1974): the defiance of its heroes. Like those characters, Stewart feels that his efforts are nothing to

hide behind and thus, when his identity is revealed on television soon after he becomes Green Lantern, he continues. His dedication, goodness, and effort make him an ideal candidate for a superhero. In particular, Stewart's characteristics make him important because he was one of the first African American characters to take a superhero identity traditionally reserved for whites and was soon followed by Steel, Captain Marvel, and the Punisher. However, in having to live up to a largely white historical terrain—in both his lives (as his secret identity and as the superhero)—Stewart forged his own distinct identity. Aside from his refusal to wear a mask (a standard superhero trope), he joined the Darkstars, which rivaled the Lantern Corps as a galaxy police force, and became a regular Green Lantern to serve with the Justice League of America, even though Hal Jordan was a founding member. Indeed, when the Cartoon Network revived the animated series of the Justice League of America (JLA) in 2001, featuring Superman, Batman, the Martian Manhunter, Wonder Woman, Flash, and Hawkgirl, John Stewart was chosen as the Green Lantern. Many purists objected to the decision, and some suggested that Stewart was chosen because he was African American, despite the presence of heroes who were not originally members of the JLA. Stewart is thus representative of the possibility of African American superheroes and the challenge of incorporating them into the superhero.

As Jeffrey A. Brown notes, the limited success achieved by the various black superheroes produced by mainstream comics publishers Marvel and DC Comics in the 1970s may have come about because these heroes were too closely based on and identified with the heroes of the Blaxploitation phenomenon in film.<sup>4</sup> One hero of the era who escaped this identification was the Black Panther. Often regarded as the first modern black superhero (though he is African, not African American), the Black Panther has also been one of the most enduring. Although several different characters in the history of the Marvel universe have used the Black Panther name, the modern-day Black Panther was created for Marvel Comics by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, first appearing in *Fantastic Four* Vol. 1, #54, in July 1966. The character thus predated the founding of the Black Panther Party by three months, though his status as a strong representative of black identity has sometimes caused readers to assume that his name refers to the party. (Indeed, his name was briefly changed to the Black Leopard in the late 1960s to avoid this confusion, but the change didn't stick.) The Black Panther is the superhero identity of one T'Challa, king of the African nation of Wakanda, though many of his adventures are set in the U.S. His first extended role in the Marvel universe, for example, occurred when he traveled to New York to join the Avengers superhero team as a supporting character. His first starring role came in *Jungle Action* Vol. 2, #6–24 (Sept. 1973–Nov. 1976); written by Don McGregor, this sequence involved one of the first self-contained, multi-issue story arcs in comics history,



though that device would later become quite common. The Black Panther was then featured in his own self-titled series, mostly written and drawn by Kirby, that ran from January 1977 to March 1979. A four-issue miniseries, also titled *Black Panther*, appeared in 1988, written by Peter B. Gillis and drawn by Denys Cowan, who later became a founder of Milestone Comics, the first mainstream comics publisher to focus on multicultural (and especially African American) superheroes.

A stylish new *Black Panther* series, which received considerable critical acclaim, was introduced in 1998, written by Christopher Priest and illustrated by Mark Texeira. This updated series includes a quick reiteration of the Black Panther's background story and the history of Wakanda (which is one of the world's most technologically advanced nations, thanks to its unusually rich mineral resources and T'Challa's wise governance). The series also includes some clever narrative innovations, such as initially telling the story largely from the point of view of the rather ordinary (white) State Department functionary Everett K. Ross, who is assigned to look after T'Challa and his considerable entourage when the African king comes to America, seeking to solve the murder of a young black girl and to investigate the corrupting of the Tomorrow Fund, a U.S. charity funded mostly by the Wakandan government. The Black Panther received still another makeover with the appearance of a new ongoing series beginning in 2005, written by Hudlin and drawn by John Romita Jr. (among others).

Sporting a costume noticeably similar to that of Batman, the Black Panther is a superhero very much in the vein of Batman, depending on athleticism, special training, and high-tech gimmicks in the absence of actual superhuman abilities. However, the Black Panther does have somewhat enhanced abilities, thanks to the effects of a magical African herb that he alone, as chief of the Panther tribe, is entitled to ingest. Many of his adventures have little to do with his race, although his status as an African king foregrounds his cultural and ethnic background. This status also introduces a number of political elements into the Black Panther comics, as when the initial plot arc of the Priest–Texeira reboot deals centrally with T'Challa's efforts to fight off a coup attempt in Wakanda. The royal status of T'Challa is also reflected in his unerring nobility that at times borders on the stereotypical; similarly, the representation of the royal and tribal politics of Wakanda sometimes spills well over into the stereotypical in its vision of Africa as a pre-modern locale. Nevertheless, as opposed to the individualism of many superheroes (especially black heroes such as Luke Cage and Sabre), T'Challa does display considerable political skills and leadership abilities, as when he becomes the leader of a black superhero team including Luke Cage, Blade, and Brother Voodoo in the Hudlin Black Panther series. The Black Panther's various interactions with other superheroes (including his membership in the Avengers) also indicate his status as an

important part of the mainstream Marvel universe while also reflecting the general intertextuality that helps to give that universe coherence.

If African American superheroes stand out for their rarity in the world of the comics, African American superheroines are marginal to their world because of both their race and their gender. In a mostly white world dominated by male readers and male characters, African American women tend to be absent, present but invisible, or simply represented as the object of masculine desire. The most widely known black heroine is Storm from Marvel's *X-Men*. Storm does not appear in the original version of the *X-Men*, published in 1964, but in *Giant Size X-Men* #1 in 1975. Although retaining Cyclops and Professor Xavier from its original incarnation, the newer version presents an international team that includes the Russian Colossus, the German Nightcrawler, and the Canadian Wolverine. Although the latter became a runaway favorite of the comic, Storm was also popular and, perhaps more importantly, became perhaps the most indispensable character. Although introduced as an African princess (and eventual queen of Wakanda), Storm (Ororo Munroe) is the child of an African mother and an African American father. Her long white hair and blue eyes clearly contrast with the more Afro-centric look in the tradition of Angela Davis or even Grace Jones and might initially raise questions about Storm's construction in comparison to her black male counterparts. Her "distinct" look is merely the most immediate example of a character who "reconciles a whole gamut of conflicting myths and ideologies. An elemental force of nature, she is the least spontaneous and most withdrawn of the *X-Men*. Asexual (even for a superheroine) she sports perhaps the most revealing and fetishistic black costume of any 1970s Marvel or DC character."<sup>55</sup> Also, her powers—which range from the ability to control the weather to the ability to perform magic and witchcraft—hint at a black nationalist ideology that situates Africa as the cradle of civilization. Much of her power, specifically her psychic resistance, emerges as much from her traditional heritage as from her status as a mutant. Moreover, as Richard Reynolds notes, Storm "is certainly an exciting and original creation—her powers have great visual appeal, and her long white hair and dark complexion provide the kind of contrasting visual image that gives credibility to the underlying pretext of the mutant theme."<sup>56</sup> Storm's role as one of the leaders of the *X-Men*—usually alongside the American Cyclops—embodies the emergence of African Americans as critical, equal partners in positioning America as a leader of the world. For example, she is above the consistent tension created by Wolverine's challenges to Cyclops's authority as well as the anxiety Colossus could produce in the midst of Cold War America. Indeed, when Cyclops leaves the team (*Uncanny X-Men* #138), Storm takes over as the team leader and maintains that leadership when Cyclops again vies for it in *Uncanny X-Men* #201.

Like the meeting between the Falcon and the Black Panther (whom Storm eventually marries), which symbolizes the significance of African American identity, Storm's heritage represents the complex presence of blacks in America—specifically the journey of blacks—literally and culturally—from Africa to America. So, while Storm is frequently identified and influenced by her African heritage, there is a clear narrative of Americanization. In the 1990s' animated TV adaptations of both the *X-Men* and *Spiderman* comics Storm's African heritage appears only minimally and she is frequently voiced without the African accent she is thought to have in the comic. In the three X-Men films—*X-Men* (2000), *X2: X-Men United* (2003), and *X-Men 3: The Last Stand* (2006)—Storm is played as an African American by African American actress Halle Berry. In the final film, which incorporates parts of the Phoenix Saga from the comic, Storm takes over as the leader of the mutant school and as the leader of the X-Men after the deaths of Professor Xavier and Cyclops.

Storm's place in the hierarchy of the X-Men command structure not only symbolizes the elevation of African Americans and women by the Civil Rights movement and the second wave of feminism but also acts as a way to demonstrate an ideal American collective that encompasses all genders and ethnic groups. Reynolds argues, for instance, that "Storm—despite her name—is on all occasions an advocate of calm and the healing of divisions within the X-Men team or outside it."<sup>7</sup> It is Storm who is able to stabilize Jean Grey when, as the Phoenix, she threatens the universe after she is corrupted and starts to come psychically unhinged. Yet Storm's stability, or more specifically her willingness to bring stability to the team, augments and complicates her presence as an African American female heroine. Jean Grey's sexuality is manifested through a traditional romantic relationship with Cyclops, but Storm seems to combine—though not necessarily reflect—elements of the black mammy in her privileging of the X-Men over her own desires as well as the "exotic," overly sexual black female. By combining these characteristics, however, her depiction avoids falling into stereotype, especially when she takes up a romantic relationship with the mutant Forge and eventually marries the Black Panther. Also, her seclusion from the rest of the team is based on her life as an orphan and her absence of friends but also highlights a similar seclusion of African Americans, who have been the sole black faces at schools or at work before and in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Nevertheless, Storm became a successful character (both critically and commercially) because of the integral role she plays in the practical and imaginative structure of the X-Men. As a black woman, she succeeds as a character for a predominantly white male readership because she is the stabilizing force in a groundbreaking team even as she pushes the boundaries for traditional representations of superheroes. Thus, although Reynolds believes that "Storm reflects many of the

traditional solutions to devising a female superhero in a team context,"<sup>8</sup> when considered against previous images of black women and black heroes of the era, Storm is one of the most innovative figures in the African American superhero canon.

Other black superheroes of the era remained more in isolation from the comics mainstream, largely because they were published by marginal presses. A key example is *Sabre*, a 38-page trade paperback written by Don McGregor and illustrated by Paul Gulacy. Appearing in 1978, *Sabre* became the first publication issued by Eclipse Enterprises, which would go on to become Eclipse Comics. It can also lay claim to being one of the first graphic novels, appearing in the same year as Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, which is widely (though not quite accurately) cited as the first graphic novel. *Sabre* is also historically important because the original paperback was sold exclusively through comic-book stores, proving the viability of that method of distribution for longer and more expensive comics. The initial *Sabre* paperback, now again in print in a twentieth-anniversary edition published by Image Comics in 1998, was followed by a fourteen-issue comic-book series, the first two of which reprinted the original black-and-white graphic novel in color. All of the *Sabre* comics feature the same eponymous African American hero, given his name by his favorite weapon, though he also totes a fancy high-tech pistol.

Sabre and his beautiful-but-deadly (white) lover-sidekick, Melissa Siren, have no actual superpowers, but both are preternaturally tough, courageous, and skilled in combat. Sabre, in particular, has become a hero and has developed his own staunchly held code of beliefs, tempered in the fires of a difficult upbringing in a series of rehabilitation centers, none of which was able to quell his fierce individualism and resistance to oppressive authority. He continues in this vein in the comics, which take place in a postapocalyptic America in which the social system has collapsed beneath the pressures of greed and conformism. As Sabre explains to Melissa in one key (postcoital) sequence, his rebellion against society began when he realized that most in the general population were being "narcotized" by their "sensory video systems," a sort of futuristic form of television. As he puts it, "the materialistic carrot held under their noses" has caused most people to give up their individuality, while "I.Q. scores and salaries became more important than a sense of honor, or a measure of dignity in dealing with yourself or others."<sup>9</sup>

Melissa shares Sabre's romantic rejection of the coldly calculating world around her, though from a different point of view that arises from her status as the first "test tube fetus," a product of a project designed, in a mode somewhat reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, to do away with sexual reproduction altogether, freeing up humans for "more important things." Melissa, however, feels that something important has been lost in

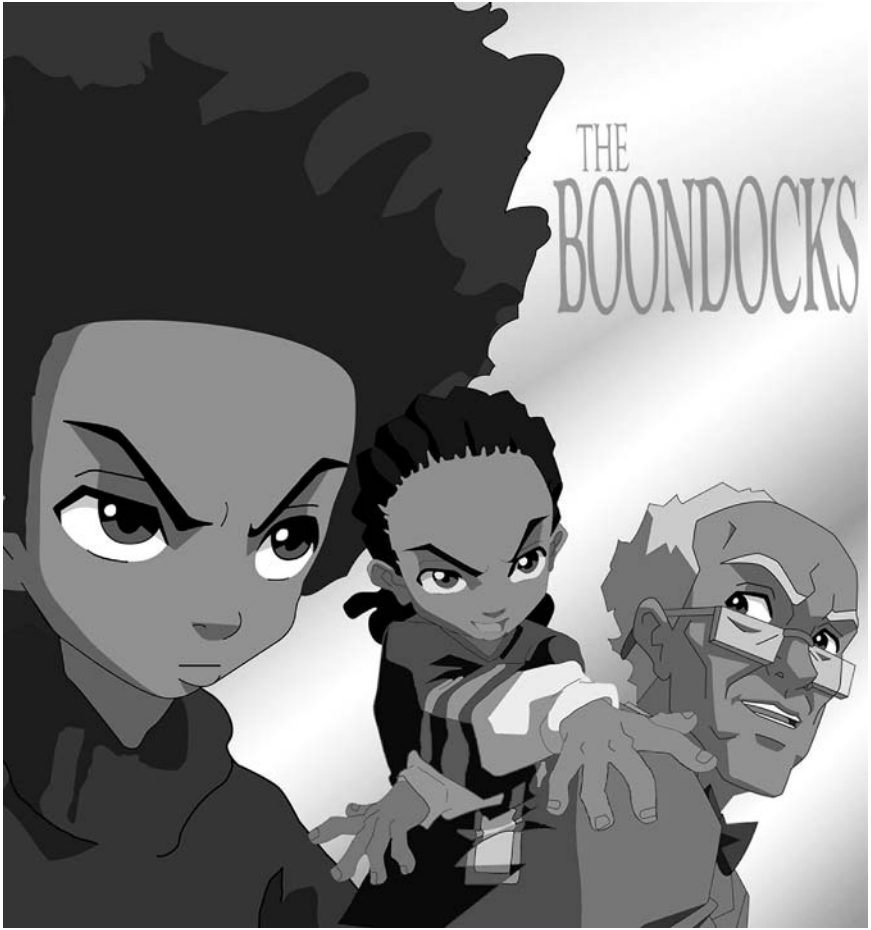
freeing conception from its “orgasm origins.” That something, she concludes, is “magic,” a quality that is entirely lacking in the thoroughly routinized world in which she grows up.

In the *Sabre* graphic novel, the total triumph of consumer capitalism has led to an almost total collapse of civil society, creating a post-apocalyptic atmosphere of chaos and despair in which a few unscrupulous individuals have seized power, creating a (rather dysfunctional) dystopian state the power of which is resisted by only a few determined rebels. The routinization theme is emphasized in the way Sabre and Melissa must make their way across a bizarre Disneyland-like amusement park in order to try to free a group of these rebels who have been taken captive. The implication is clear: any apparent magic in this world is a mere simulacrum of magic, contained and commodified, bottled for mass consumption in carefully controlled doses. This park is run by the Overseer, a mysterious and sinister figure, though much of the actual work is carried out by his henchman Blackstar Blood, a villain with a certain sense of honor that ultimately leads him to come to the aid of Sabre and Melissa at a crucial moment, helping them to defeat the Overseer, though even more powerful enemies remain on the horizon.

*Sabre's* romanticism now seems a bit quaint, while its portrayal of Melissa is a bit sexist: despite the fact that she is strong and courageous, she functions in the text largely as a sexual object who must be rescued from a sexual fate worse than death by the hyper-masculine Sabre. Sabre himself is a hero somewhat in the Blaxploitation vein, though his swashbuckling style is modeled more directly on Errol Flynn's Captain Blood. Indeed, Sabre's race is largely beside the point, serving mainly to help establish his status as an outsider to the society around him, though that is a status he shares with more mainstream heroes such as Luke Cage.

Meanwhile, the reference to Cage in *The Boondocks* suggests the problematic nature of black superhero comics, which have often either failed to address genuine issues of racial politics or have addressed these issues in limited and stereotypical ways. *The Boondocks* itself, based on the daily syndicated comic strip of the same title by Aaron McGruder, is largely an attempt to rectify this situation by aggressively addressing such issues through the medium of comics. And this attempt has been successful in that the syndicated strip of *The Boondocks* (which has also been collected in several bound volumes) has been one of the most prominent examples of African American comics in recent years. This strip (like the animated TV series based on it) satirizes a number of aspects of American politics and culture, largely from the point of view of Freeman, an inner-city Chicago kid who is transplanted, along with his younger brother, to the suburbs (the Boondocks of the title) so that they can grow up in safer surroundings. McGruder has forayed into the world of comic books and graphic novels as

*The Boondocks*, 2005. Shown from left: Huey Freeman (voice: Regina King), Riley Freeman (voice: Regina King), Robert “Granddad” Freeman (voice: John Witherspoon).



*Cartoon Network/Photofest*

well, as in the case of the graphic novel *Birth of a Nation* (2004), coauthored with filmmaker Reginald Hudlin. Based on the questionable circumstances surrounding the presidential election of George W. Bush in 2000, this novel focuses on the largely black (and poor) city of East St. Louis, Illinois, where numerous residents are fraudulently denied the right to vote in a presidential election, swinging Illinois (and the country) in favor of Governor Caldwell of Texas, a Bush-like presidential candidate. In protest, East St. Louis secedes from the Union (and, surprisingly, manages to maintain its independence), presenting numerous opportunities for

outrageous satire that are made all the more effective by their uncomfortably close resemblance to real-world situations and events.

As with comic books in general, however, much of the action involving African Americans in comics has centered on superheroes. Although many of these comics have also dealt quite explicitly with questions related to race and racism, race itself is often not particularly an issue in such comics, except that the very fact that the heroes are black obviously has strong implications given the way in which comic-book superheroes often serve as fantasy role models for young male readers. Brown puts great emphasis on this aspect of superhero comics in his study of the black superheroes created by Milestone Comics in the 1990s, arguing that characters such as Icon, Hardware, and Static, the staples of the Milestone line, helped to “facilitate a progressive interpretation of black masculinity which incorporates intelligence with physicality,” producing “models which stress holism rather than the one-dimensional hypermasculinity found in other contemporary comic books.”<sup>10</sup>

The Milestone line of “multicultural” (which mostly meant African American) comic book heroes was an overt attempt to correct both the shortage of black superheroes in mainstream comics and the stereotypical representation of black superheroes when they did appear in such comics. However, Milestone (whose principals included established artists such as Dwayne McDuffie and Denys Cowan) took a moderate approach, both in the style and content of their comics and in their business practices, leading to considerable controversy. For example, their decision to contract with DC Comics to distribute their various comic books was seen by many (including rival, but more radical, African American comic book publishers such as Ania) as a sell-out to the white establishment. Meanwhile, heroes such as Icon (who has largely the same superpowers as Superman) were described by Milestone’s critics as a sort of “Superman in blackface.” Even attempts by Milestone to rectify the problematic representation of black superheroes in the past (as when Luke Cage was parodied in *Icon* #13 as Buck Wild, Mercenary Man) were sometimes seen as sellouts. Nevertheless, Milestone, while never a huge commercial success, did reach a larger audience than smaller rivals such as Ania. Still, even this effort was short-lived. Milestone debuted in 1993 with the titles *Hardware*, *Icon*, *Blood Syndicate*, and *Static*, which remained the mainstays of the company until 1997, when its comic book division was shut down. Today, the company’s products are probably best known through the *Static Shock* animated series, which took the *Static* comic book to television from 2000 to 2004 on Kids’ WB and has been rerun on the Cartoon Network.

The limited success of Milestone Comics in the 1990s indicates the marginal position of African American characters to the comics even today, though it is certainly the case that such characters did make some significant

advances during that decade. For example, the Marvel cyborg superhero *Deathlok*, who had briefly appeared in the 1970s, was resurrected in the early 1990s (with McDuffie and Cowan as key creative forces) as the alter ego of African American pacifist intellectual Michael Collins. After discovering a secret weapons project, Collins is murdered and then resurrected in the body of an unstoppable cyborg killing machine. However, he manages to use his intellect (and expertise in cybernetics) to gain control of the machine and turn it into a force for good, installing among other things a “no-kill” order as a prime directive. Still, Collins experiences ongoing conflicts between his identity as a person and the identity that has been thrust upon him in the form of the cyborg body, a dilemma that has obvious ramifications in terms of African American masculine identities. Indeed, the parallel between cyborgs and African Americans is made quite overt in the very beginning of this resurrected series in a four-issue serial collectively entitled “The Souls of Cyber-Folk,” in which Collins liberally quotes from W. E. B. Du Bois while himself becoming aware of the status of cyborgs such as himself as a sort of outcast minority whose half-human, half-machine status echoes the “double consciousness” of African Americans, per Du Bois.

Because of his intense pacifism (which often brings him into conflict with more violent Marvel superheroes, such as the urban vigilante the Punisher), *Deathlok* (who prefers to be called simply Michael Collins as he struggles to separate himself from the killing machine that houses his consciousness) is a special case among the superheroes of the 1990s. Still, even African American heroes who remained ultraviolent often became more sensitive and more humanized during the decade. One of the most successful African American superheroes of the 1990s, for example, was Todd McFarlane’s *Spawn*, who began appearing in his own self-titled comic in 1992. Though ostensibly part of a trend toward generally darker, grittier, and more brutal superheroes that began with *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1987), *Spawn* also represents a counter-current to this trend in that he is also presented as a sensitive and tormented soul who is not entirely comfortable with his own violence and his own superhuman status.

*Spawn* is also unusual (though not unprecedented) as a superhero in that his powers have supernatural origins. He begins as Al Simmons, an African American hit man for the CIA, gradually growing more and more concerned at the corruption and sinister shenanigans afoot in that organization, especially due to the machinations of his boss, Jason Wynn. As a result, Wynn has Simmons assassinated, after which the former hit man finds himself in hell. Due to his background and training, Simmons is identified as the perfect leader for the army that is being mounted in hell for an all-out assault on the forces of heaven. Desperate to see his beloved wife



Wanda Blake one more time, Simmons makes a deal with the demon Malebolgia to be resurrected as a “hellspawn” so that he can return to earth for a visit with Wanda. Simmons, however, does not entirely understand the terms of his deal with Malebolgia. Moreover, he finds that he is returned to earth after an absence of five years, during which time Wanda has married Simmons’s former best friend, with whom she has a fifteen-month-old child. Simmons also finds that most of his memories have been erased, so that he finds himself confused and disoriented, a situation made even worse by the fact that he does not understand the superhuman powers with which he has been gifted as part of his resurrection. These powers include preternatural strength and toughness, but many of them reside in his elaborate costume (a living thing in its own right), which gives him numerous additional abilities.

Much of the early storyline of *Spawn* has to do with Simmons’s explorations of these considerable powers and his attempts to avoid domination by Malebolgia and his sinister henchman, the Violator, who often appears in the guise of a grotesque clown. He also begins to battle various villains (such as a virtually indestructible cyborg hit man who works for the mob), clearly placing him within the realm of the superhero, despite the unusual origins of his powers. As the series progresses, however, *Spawn* (perhaps not surprisingly, given the circumstances) becomes darker and darker, evolving into something of an anti-hero—who at one point seizes power in hell and becomes the King of Hell. Later, *Spawn* achieves godlike powers and is able to reconstruct the world after it is destroyed in the Armageddon that has been looming throughout the series. God and Satan, however, have no part in this new world, being excluded by *Spawn* because they refuse to cease their incessant bickering and battling.

Widely heralded for its innovative content and striking artwork, *Spawn* has now appeared continuously for more than fifteen years, making it perhaps the most successful comic book series of all time to feature an African American protagonist—no mean feat given that it has been published by Image Comics and thus lacks the distribution and marketing clout of the larger Marvel and DC. It has also inspired a number of spinoff comics, as well as action figures and video games. The *Spawn* comics have also provided the basis for a 1997 live-action film and for a widely acclaimed animated miniseries, *Todd McFarlane’s Spawn*, which aired on HBO for three seasons from 1997 to 1999, winning two Emmys. The overall *Spawn* phenomenon thus indicates the possibility of success for African American superheroes in contemporary American culture, though it is also the case that race is not usually a particularly central issue in the *Spawn* stories. Race, in fact, becomes virtually irrelevant as the protagonist moves beyond the human, though this fact itself potentially defamiliarizes our view of race within the human world.

In contrast, the character Blade (another entry in the darker and grittier vein of superhero comics of the 1990s) is clearly African American, while his status as half-man, half-vampire gives him a duality similar to the one African Americans face daily. Born Eric Brooks to a mother who was murdered by the vampire Deacon Frost while she was pregnant, Blade first appeared in *Tomb of Dracula* #10 (July 1973) but did not become the solo focus of a comic until *Blade: The Vampire Hunter* #1–10 (July 1994–April 1995). Like Spawn, Blade is a vigilante who often conflicts with other superheroes, like Spiderman, because of his single-minded pursuit: hunting vampires. Also like Spawn, Blade has no secret identity, whose own story would have presented an opportunity to explore his life as a black man. Meanwhile, Blade (as played by Wesley Snipes) has gone on to become the central figure in a series of successful films that represent the only serious attempt to produce superhero films with a black superhero, thus standing in sharp contrast to superhero spoofs such as *Meteor Man* (1993) and *Blankman* (1994), starring Robert Townsend and Damon Wayans, respectively. In comparison with serious films featuring white superheroes (such as Tim Burton's two *Batman* films) such films appear as "bumbling spoofs. Although well-intentioned films, with ultimate true heroism from the comedic protagonists, they are overwritten by the image of the black-costumed hero as a failure, as a buffoon incapable of exercising real power."<sup>11</sup> Even the appearance of Steel, the African American member of the Superman family, was undercut by the casting of Shaquille O'Neal in the film version, along with a generally campy, low-budget presentation.

The treatment of Blade highlights a continual and fundamental tension in the superhero universe. As Reynolds points out, "A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action," which leads to a situation in which "almost by definition the superhero is battling of behalf of the status quo."<sup>12</sup> As a result, direct challenges by the superheroes themselves to that status quo—with obvious exceptions such as a crime-ridden Gotham—would be anathema. The presence of African American superheroes may strike some as more an affirmative action effort than an opportunity to take comics into new directions. Even the Falcon, preceding Black Lightning's refusal to join the Justice League, was accused of being mere "quota representation" for the Avengers team (*Avengers* 181–194), despite the endorsement of Captain America. The tension of how to integrate African Americans into the comics becomes embodied in their presence on superhero teams. Their presence becomes more acceptable as the teams are less mainstream and more willing to take less traditional "heroic" action. Blade's own partnerships have been made possible by their tensions with heroes known for privileging the safety of humans over capturing villains. African American superheroes, then, become acceptable within the

context of more famous or popular white superheroes or amongst a sub-genre that minimizes racial difference in favor of a comprehensive rejection of mainstream interpretations and ideologies of classic superhero mythology.

The success of series such as *Spawn* and *Blade* has also cleared the way for more nuanced treatment of race issues in the comics of the early twenty-first century. In contrast to Milestone's more moderate approach, black independent publishing company Stickman Graphics published the graphic novel *The Festering Season* (2002), written by Kevin Tinsley with artwork by Tim Smith <sup>3</sup>. The novel follows Rene Duboise, a young black female who suspends her voodoo training in Haiti to return to New York City after the death of her mother, who has been killed at the hands of the police. Rene is forced to navigate a multi-gendered, multi-racial, multi-faith world with competing, complex interests at work. She remains confident in her knowledge and abilities yet displays a hesitancy that comes from incomplete training and the scope of the forces with which she must contend. While still mourning her mother's death, Rene contends with an arena filled with vengeance, sorcery, police brutality, political maneuvering, and racial divisiveness. The novel combines the genres of science fiction, horror, and crime fiction alongside an explicit sociopolitical commentary that moves beyond the rhetorical debates one might see in the Green Lantern/Green Arrow comics or even the Milestone family. Amid Rene's eventual discovery that the dark magic that seems to permeate her mother's death may be initiated by the drug lord/philanthropist Gangleos, she must contend with a city in the midst of two controversial trials and teaming with anxiety about racial tensions, police brutality, and disease scares. Gangleos uses anxieties that mirror those in America at the end of the twentieth century, including an explicit disregard for the poor and homeless, to execute a plan to turn the city into an army of zombies. Thus, the commentary on race and politics become dominant themes on par with the more traditional story of a superheroine coming of age and into her powers.

Rene stands as a black female protagonist whose own racial and gendered position becomes central to resolving the novel. She mixes thoughtfulness, common sense, toughness, and vulnerability but also recognizes the frustration of the African American community and the impact of Gangleos's plan, despite skepticism from those who dismiss magic and voodoo. Like Storm, Rene exists as black female protagonist in a pop cultural milieu dominated by (white) men. As a result, she finds herself navigating a world dominated by men within the comic as well. Yet the novel remains relatively female-centered, especially when Rene meets Isabella Delsento, who seeks to avenge the death of her brother Hernesto, whom she believes was murdered by Gangleos. The women, typically enough,

frequently find themselves fighting off groups of men with their fists and with magic, remaining surrounded by men attempting to impose their will on the city and its communities. Whether it is Gangleos, Reverend Sheffield, the African American minister and community leader who protests Rene's mother's death, or the male-dominated political structure under fire for its policies and police action, Rene and Isabella face numerous foes and find that they are compelled to find solace with each other in an attempt to discover the truth. An exception is Paul Whythe, who works as an anthropologist at NYU and NYPD. The novel positions Rene as a black female voodoo priestess who comments on race, gender, and faith. She sees not only racial tensions and gender dynamics, but Gangleos's manipulation of the city's ignorance of and hostility towards the Voodoo and Santeria communities, whom he attempts to eliminate because they are capable of discerning his larger plan. In Chapter Five, after her aunt encourages her to convert to Christianity, she informs her aunt that she rejects religious doctrine and dogma that she sees as divisive.

What becomes clear is that *The Festering Season* makes sociopolitical issues inseparable from the plot of the comic. The novel depicts a pre-9/11 New York filled with fear, apprehension, and resentment. Indeed, in the Afterword, author Kevin Tinsley reacts to the post-9/11 reimagining of New York as a national site of trauma and the casting of Rudy Giuliani as a national hero. The result is what Tinsley describes as a realization of "how oblivious the rest of the country is to the police state that was New York City throughout the 1990s."<sup>13</sup> Giuliani, according to Tinsley, had "a local reputation for being an extremely divisive mayor who never hesitated from trampling his constituents' constitutional and civil rights."<sup>14</sup> In particular, Gangleos uses the death of Rene's mother (based on the real-life shooting of Amadou Diallo in 1999) and the possible riot after the murder trial of his own brother to produce enough bloodshed to enact a spell that would transform the city into zombies. The riot at her funeral is based on a similar tension caused by an unwanted police presence at the funeral of Patrick Dorismond, who was also killed by police officers. The powder that triggers the spell is transported throughout the city by trucks spraying insecticide because of public fears about the West Nile virus. Thus, by explicitly situating sociopolitical issues at the center of *The Festering Season*, Tinsley and Smith make the distinct experience of its black female protagonist vital to understanding the narrative itself and less likely to be dismissed or considered blackface representations of classic (white) superhero tales.

Similarly focused on the political experience of African Americans is the revisionary Captain America tale, *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2004), written by Robert Morales and drawn by Kyle Baker. The original (white) Captain America was a sickly man who was given an experimental serum in order to give him enhanced (though not, strictly speaking, superhuman)

strength, agility, and endurance so that he could contribute to the U.S. war effort in World War II. In *Truth*, this background is explored further with the suggestion (based on historical realities such as the Nazi-like experiments conducted on black sharecroppers from 1932 to 1972 in the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male) that such a potentially dangerous serum would have likely been tested largely on African American subjects. Here, the treatments lead to mostly disastrous results, though one subject, Isaiah Bradley, does manage to become a supersoldier in the Captain America vein. However, even Bradley experiences considerable negative long-term side effects from the treatments and of course is never allowed to become an American icon like Captain America, eventually finding himself imprisoned until he is pardoned during the Eisenhower administration. By focusing on a hero specifically created as an icon of Americanism, and by linking the story to the actual historical fact of medical experimentation on black men, Morales and Baker create a graphic novel with powerful social and political implications. As the black comics scholar William H. Foster III puts it in his tellingly titled collection of his own commentaries on African American superhero comics, *Looking for a Face Like Mine*, "in a world where most white people still doggedly deny the presence of discrimination, let alone racism, this was as bold a step as has ever been taken in the history of comics."<sup>15</sup>

Another recent superhero graphic novel that deals with race and racism in a particularly overt manner is *The American Way* (2007), written by John Ridley, penciled by Georges Jeanty, and inked by Karl Story and Ray Snyder. Set in the early 1960s, this comic features an alternative-history Cold War scenario in which a government-sponsored band of superheroes, known as the Civil Defense Corps (CDC), is a major part of the U.S. defense strategy. These heroes have legitimate superpowers, thanks to a high-tech gene therapy administered to them by the government. However, their role is otherwise a sham, and the various battles they fight (against alien monsters and various other villains) are secretly staged by the government as a sort of public relations gimmick designed to foster a sense of confidence in the American population and to serve as a warning against the Soviets. In this sense, the title of the novel is clearly ironic, suggesting that the oft-touted "American way" is shot through with deceit and deception, more image than substance. However, the principal irony in the title lies in the way the comic explores the deep-seated racism that runs through the supposedly egalitarian society of America.

*The American Way* is told largely from the point of view of Wesley Chatham, an advertising executive for an automobile company, who is hired by the Kennedy Administration to serve as the "Marketing Director" for the CDC. This very title suggests the element of manipulation of public opinion that is key to the government's strategies, though Chatham

himself is shocked as he begins to learn the extent of the deception that underlies the operations of the CDC. However, despite the best efforts of the government to use the CDC to stir up feelings of patriotism and solidarity among Americans, American society seems to be falling apart, largely because of racial tensions. In an effort to bring African Americans into the fold, the government decides to create the first black superhero, recruiting Jason Fisher, a black soldier with a chip on his shoulder, for the role. Fisher is given Superman-like powers: he has great strength, can fly, and is essentially invulnerable, though his gene therapy is intentionally altered so that he can still feel pain, thus limiting his power to some extent. Further, his racial identity is kept a closely guarded secret, even from the other heroes in the CDC. Thus, in his superhero guise as the New American, he is given a costume that covers all of his skin, including a visored helmet that hides his face.

The New American's racial identity is revealed when he breaks his face-mask in a battle with another hero, who has gone insane. The public reacts largely to the revelation with racist outrage, and many Southern members of the CDC refuse to work with the black hero, eventually withdrawing from the CDC to form a separate Southern Defense Corps (SDC) that operates only in the South. Things come to a head when a vicious serial killer known as Hellbent (one of the CDC's periodic show enemies) is released from prison and assigned to kill a delegation of Cuban diplomats who have been sent to the United Nations. Instead, Hellbent (who is white) goes AWOL and attacks a busload of black freedom riders, killing all of them except Fisher's brother, whom he intentionally leaves crippled and maimed, but alive. In the process, he defeats a group of CDC heroes (who are unaccustomed to real battles and thus ineffectual), killing one of them. In response, Fisher tracks down and kills Hellbent, after which the ultra-racists decide to go after Fisher because he has killed a white man—something they cannot tolerate, even if the white man is a crazed murderer. The CDC comes to the aid of the SDC, and a fierce battle ensues. Meanwhile, the government, unscrupulous as always, launches a nuclear strike, hoping to destroy all the superheroes. Instead, as the result of a madman's plot, missiles are diverted toward several major U.S. cities, though the heroes manage to divert them at the last second. One of the heroes gives the full classified file on the CDC to reporter Tannis Darling, who has been investigating the CDC throughout the novel, which ends as Darling is apparently about to blow the lid off the government's nefarious operations, though the government has already launched a furious spin effort to blame it all on a Communist conspiracy.

*The American Way* is a biting piece of political satire, typical of its time in its cynical assumption that the U.S. government is involved in a variety of dishonest manipulations, intricate conspiracies, and blatant cover-ups,

though it is perhaps unusual in the way it extends this vision of the government back to the Kennedy administration, still thought by some to be a shining beacon of virtue in the days before Watergate and before the Vietnam War became a major issue in American life. The novel is also unstinting in its presentation of the extent and ugliness of American racism, especially in the South. Indeed, virtually all white Southerners come off as overt racists in the novel; even Northerners, who tend to support Fisher and eschew blatant racism, still harbor subtle racist tendencies beneath the surface.

## NOTES

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# Standup Comedy

*Leon Rappoport*

What is standup comedy? Where did it come from? Why has it become an increasingly prominent and valuable part of contemporary African American culture? As each of these questions is considered, it should become apparent that hardly any aspect of mainstream American culture, whether language, music, or history in general, has not been directly or indirectly shaped by African Americans. Because of this, much of what follows is significant for virtually all racial and ethnic groups in our society.

## DEFINING STANDUP COMEDY

We all think we know it when we see it, of course, but as an art form, contemporary standup comedy is still ambiguous enough that writers even disagree about whether to spell it with or without a hyphen. And there is no standard dictionary definition. A Google search only brings up a relatively formal Wikipedia entry describing it as a style of comedy performed by a single comedian who usually uses a microphone to speak directly to the audience. The performance itself, called a monologue, typically consists of a rapid series of jokes, satirical funny stories, ironic parodies, mimicry, and bits of slapstick, most of it aimed at ridiculing conventional values and attitudes. This seems quite accurate, yet for most practical purposes, it may serve just as well to stay with the more comprehensive one-liner description of standup provided by Ronald Smith. In his book about the lives of famous comedians, he simply asserts that standup is nothing more or less than “. . . the art of getting up in front of people and being funny—one of the easiest sounding, most difficult things in the world.”<sup>1</sup> This is also accurate, but unlike the contemporary focus of the Wikipedia statement, it suggests that standup has a very long history. Both of these perspectives are outlined below, although in order to appreciate the unique features of African American standup, it will be necessary to consider the historical factors that have shaped its development.

## THE CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

The relatively short and probably most widely accepted perspective on standup comedy follows from the style and content of comic monologues that began to gain popularity in nightclubs during the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Jewish and black performers such as Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and Bill Cosby (Richard Pryor arrived at the end, in 1962) initiated the style we can see today on HBO and other popular venues, in which the performer typically engages the audience in a type of one-way, meandering conversation that can range from intimate sexual matters to controversial social and political topics, often with a good deal of obscene language mixed in. By dealing with such previously taboo topics and language, these so-called “rebel comedians” were making a sharp break from the familiar, feel-good humor of the past, the bland routines of traditional white headliners such as Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Fred Allen, and others who made their reputations on radio after emerging from music halls and vaudeville theaters.<sup>2</sup> The remarkable recent history of standup, extending from the comedians of the 1950s and 1960s to such stars of the present as Chris Rock, Whoopi Goldberg, and the Wayans brothers, will be more fully examined in a later section dealing with the contemporary comedy scene. Meanwhile, it will be useful to consider material indicating that standup has a very long history dating back at least to the ancient Greeks and Romans, if not earlier. Centuries upon centuries ago, performers staked their livelihoods—and sometimes their lives—on their ability to get up in front of people and be funny.

## THE MORE REMOTE ORIGINS

When introducing their recent book about the history of humor, Dutch historians Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg noted that most scholars have only recently begun to recognize humor “as a key to the cultural codes and sensibilities of the past.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, to understand the ways that most ordinary people were thinking and acting in any given historical era—the social norms, values, and attitudes governing their behavior—find out what made them laugh. More to the point of this chapter, find out *who* made them laugh. These ideas clearly apply equally well to the present; so far as we can tell, the comedians of the ancient world were surprisingly similar to those we know today.

Among the ancient Greeks, humor was provided by (1) actors who performed plays and improvised skits poking fun at women, politicians, and foreigners they considered to be barbarians, (2) politicians who became famous for speeches ridiculing their opponents, and (3) philosophers such as Socrates, who, according to Plato, couldn’t resist amusing his students by

showing up the stupidity and prejudices of the local “gentry.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Bremmer mentions an account from the fourth century BC describing the performance of a professional entertainer called a *gelotopoios* (literally “laughter-producer” or buffoon) who was hired to liven up banquets or wedding parties by telling jokes, doing mimicry, and performing slapstick. Such entertainers could not have been very different from modern standup artists.

The Romans assimilated many of the Greek culture’s traditions, and, having conquered most of the Western world, also developed a rich stock of insulting stereotypes to apply to everyone who was not a Roman . . . and even to some who were. Thus upper-class Romans, who prided themselves on being rational, disciplined, and in control of their emotions, apparently enjoyed ridiculing the primitive, impulsive behavior they attributed to plebians, women, barbarians, and slaves. In a famous case in point, Cicero attempted to ridicule and demean Mark Antony for his loss of self control caused by heavy drinking. Laughter at the expense of anyone who became disabled or was afflicted with a noticeable deformity was also a normal aspect of Greek and Roman culture.<sup>5</sup> The Romans were also easily amused by the sight of gladiators trying to kill each other or wild beasts attacking unarmed Christians—although that isn’t quite what we’re dealing with here.

Brief as they are, the foregoing summaries should be sufficient to show that the Greek and Roman founders of Western civilization enjoyed at least some of the same varieties of humor that we enjoy today, including a few that seem close to contemporary standup. It may be even more surprising—because much less knowledge is available about historically remote African societies—to find that what *is* known indicates traditions of humor similarly close to what we have today. Tribal groups did not leave many written records behind describing their cultural histories, let alone their forms of humor, but anthropologists have been able to learn a good deal by examining oral accounts handed down to storytellers and elders through the generations.

Mel Watkins provides a convenient review of this diverse material, pointing out that in African tribal groups there were typically one or more storytellers who would explain the world to young people by passing on origin myths, legends, and instructive parables. More specifically, it is believed that in West Africa there were exceptionally talented, quick-witted storytellers called griots. Part of their stock-in-trade was aggressive, satirical rhyming and joking that could easily intimidate onlookers.<sup>6</sup> They would be employed by tribal leaders as public entertainers and were often assigned to either praise or ridicule particular groups or individuals. During the early eighteenth century, an English traveler in Africa who observed griot performances considered them similar to traditional European court jesters.

Oversimplified as it may be, the image of medieval court jesters or fools presented in countless Hollywood films is not entirely false. During the Middle Ages, talented individuals who often combined the skills of a clown, the quick wit of a standup performer, and the agility of an acrobat or juggler could make their way in the world as entertainers to the rich and powerful. Some of them were fortunate enough to gain a permanent position in the court of a king or aristocrat. Once accepted as an official fool, they often had license to not only make fun of other aristocrats, but also, with some discretion, their own patron. Instead of undermining authority, however, it has been suggested that such humor served to reinforce it by demonstrating that only a fool would dare to criticize those in power.<sup>7</sup>

Most medieval performers had no permanent base. They traveled between towns and villages in small groups that usually included a mix of musicians, acrobats, actors, and storytellers who were collectively known as *jongleurs*. They put on shows on public feast days and special occasions, yet because they were frequently on the move and had no firm place in the organization of medieval society, church and community leaders perceived them as amoral and a potential danger to public order. They were, after all, childish people who engaged in make-believe and didn't stick around very long after their shows—and thus were not to be trusted. Accordingly, they were frequently treated as hardly different from thieves, con men, and prostitutes.<sup>8</sup> Some parallel exists here to the way itinerant minstrel show performers of the nineteenth century were perceived. It is noteworthy that the traditional idea of people in show business as being more or less disreputable, amoral, or just childish and untrustworthy has remained with us as a persistent stereotype.

## SLAVERY AND THE RISE OF MINSTRELSY

Having sketched the distant origins of performance humor, including some of the surprising precursors of standup that existed among the Greeks and Romans, Africans, and medieval Europeans, it is necessary to skip forward several hundred years to reach the story of how, in the context of slavery, African Americans created the comedic style that has arguably become a dominant feature of contemporary popular culture. It began on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Southern plantations where, during their off-hours, black slaves were permitted to fraternize and comfort themselves by chanting, singing, and dancing to drum beats as they had traditionally in Africa. These spontaneous gatherings were soon recognized by most plantation owners as a useful means of supporting the morale, and, therefore, productivity, of their enslaved workers. What the slave owners did not recognize was that as time went on, such gatherings fostered the growth of an increasingly sophisticated “underground” culture

in which slaves developed their own language (a mixture of abbreviated, oddly pronounced English, local slang, and some African expressions) and used it to deceive or ridicule their masters.<sup>9</sup> Some of these slaves might well have been inspired by *griot* traditions they brought with them from Africa (although there is no clear evidence to support this intriguing supposition).

In any case, the satiric trend that became a part of slave gatherings was inadvertently facilitated by plantation owners and managers. Their castoff garments were the main source of clothing for slaves, who then sewed and patched, mixed and matched the items to dress up in ways allowing them to entertain themselves by acting out parodies of their masters. High-stepping dances such as the cakewalk are said to have originated as an exaggerated imitation of the strutting posture of plantation owners. As slave gatherings became more elaborate, some of the performers who stood out because of their exceptional abilities for songs, dances, and repartee received special privileges from their owners and were encouraged to put on shows for visiting white dignitaries. By the first half of the nineteenth century, African slaves had created a substantial repertoire of ironic performance humor based on their own folk culture of music, dance, and language. Many elements of this culture were carried across the country by the growing number of slaves who gained their freedom. In some instances, newly freed slaves even published accounts of how they had made fools of their former owners.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, during the 1820s and 1830s, white theater performers called "Ethiopian delineators" began to popularize the idea of blacks as comic objects by appearing in blackface makeup to do songs and dances supposedly demonstrating absurd forms of slave behavior.

The beginning of minstrelsy is said to have occurred when one of these "delineators," named Danny Rice, noticed a black stable hand in ragged clothing hopping about in odd dance steps while singing this catchy song to himself: "Wheel about, turn about and do jus so, and every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow." Rice bought the man's clothes, learned the song and dance, and became a big hit when he took it on stage. (Following the Civil War, the phrase "Jim Crow" became a synonym for racial segregation laws, but the reason for this remains obscure.) Rice's act was quickly copied by other blackface actors who added new routines they copied from the plantation performers. "Widely imitated were the jigs and jubas of the black field hands and the cakewalks of the house servants."<sup>11</sup>

Calling themselves the "Virginia Minstrels," four of the blackface actors who found themselves out of work in New York in 1843 organized a group show that became an immediate success. Traveling minstrel shows proliferated, and by the 1850s they were the most popular form of entertainment in the country. A standard and especially popular part of all these shows

was a comedy routine in which a serious looking character called Mr. Interlocutor fed straight lines to one or two raffish, childlike characters called Mr. Bones or Mr. Tambo, who then responded with silly punch lines while carrying on in any bizarre fashion likely to get laughs.<sup>12</sup> This routine, which probably originated as a way for slave performers to entertain their masters, if not themselves, clearly seems the model for all future comedy acts involving a straight man and a funny looking comic in baggy pants.

During the Civil War, a few groups of free blacks formed their own minstrel shows, but the one that became most successful, touring through much of the country and later in Europe as well, was called the "Georgia Minstrels." Initially organized and managed by a talented black performer named George Hicks in 1865, the troupe went through several incarnations over the next dozen or more years, with various managers and new performers. One thing that remained constant, however, was the use of blackface makeup, apparently because black performers did not appear black enough to meet the stereotyped expectations of white audiences that had grown accustomed to the exaggerated makeup of white actors in the original minstrel shows.<sup>13</sup> Several major black minstrel ensembles played successfully around the country for the next twenty years or more, steadily adding new talent and improving their music, dance, and comedy offerings. But their popularity began to wane in the 1890s as the novelty of seeing a group of imitation or genuine blacks acting out reified stereotypes wore out. A noteworthy attempt to reverse this trend that didn't last very long was the first openly mixed-race troupe formed in 1893 called "The Forty Whites and Thirty Blacks."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, by this time, minstrelsy was being replaced by the somewhat more sophisticated popular entertainment known as vaudeville.

## THE VAUDEVILLE ERA

The vaudeville era lasted for approximately fifty years, starting in the early 1880s in Boston, when B. F. Keith opened a family oriented variety show theater under the title "vaudeville" in Boston. It gradually ended in the 1930s as most popular entertainment shifted to movies and radio. During its heyday, however, there were two major networks of vaudeville theaters known as the Keith Circuit and the Orpheum Circuit.

The shows that played these circuits were largely stripped of the scatological and sexually suggestive material that had been a part of minstrelsy, lest such material offend middle-class sensibilities, but widely accepted racial and ethnic stereotypes were still prominent. In general, the well-attended vaudeville theaters presented variety shows not very different from the popular TV variety shows of the 1950s, which typically consisted

of a series of separate music, dance, and comedy acts designed to appeal to respectable middle-class audiences that included women and children.

Although the careers of many talented black performers did not survive the decline of minstrelsy, some of the more exceptional stars reinvented themselves in vaudeville. For the most part, this was worked out in the segregated black vaudeville theater circuit run by an organization called the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA). It paid most performers so little that they referred to it as Tough On Black Actors and the “chitlin circuit.”<sup>15</sup> The best-known and most successful black performer was Bert Williams, who according to Watkins, was considered by many to be “the best comedian of all time.”<sup>16</sup> His comedy act included standup monologues as well as remarkable song-and-dance skills that were shown off in the context of comic dialogues with his partner George Walker. Williams was so talented that he soon moved beyond vaudeville to become one of the first African Americans to star in Broadway shows such as the Ziegfeld Follies.

Watkins provides what may well be the most thoughtful, detailed discussion of how African American performance comedy began evolving toward a new and much more sophisticated level at the end of the nineteenth century. He cites evidence showing that black comedians such as Bert Williams, George Walker, and Bob Cole were no longer depending on the old reliable funny faces and buffoonery to get laughs but were shifting the focus of their humor toward more subtle material. Accordingly, he notes that leading black comedians now began to take on the persona of traditional African tricksters—presumably the griots noted earlier.<sup>17</sup> Their acts involved less buffoonery and greater amounts of clever verbal material. Although Watkins does not mention it, further support for his thesis can be found in the more or less parallel development of the rhyming calypsonian comedians who were becoming an important cultural force in Trinidad.

The changing tone and content of performance comedy by African Americans in the early years of the twentieth century can best be understood as a reflection of the profound changes that were going on in the larger society. During what was called the “Progressive” Era, represented by the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt—who outraged mainstream racists by inviting the black scholar and educator Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House in 1901—America was becoming an urban industrial country. As more African Americans migrated to the Northeast and Midwest to take advantage of minimal but slowly expanding economic and educational opportunities, the old stereotyped barnyard and slapstick humor leftover from the plantation days became an embarrassment to them, as well as to increasing numbers of whites. During this same period, waves of immigrants from Europe were also beginning to significantly influence American culture, including African American humor. The new Irish, Italians, Jewish, Germans, Swedish, and other arrivals all brought their own

varieties of humor that eventually meshed with the African American tradition, but initially the new arrivals simply provided both black and white comedians with a rich new stock of ethnic stereotypes and greenhorn jokes. In the big city music halls and vaudeville theaters, Sambo material could now be replaced or supplemented with Goldberg, Murphy, or Giovanni jokes. The big city venues were also the places where a slight touch of integration could be experienced. Although segregation was the order of the day, and some white performers refused to perform on the same stage as blacks, the music was often ragtime (black composers Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake had their own popular stage act; Irving Berlin did not invent ragtime), there was usually at least one black comedy or song and dance act, and some whites, like Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, portrayed sympathetic characters in blackface makeup. There is no clear evidence of the extent to which African American and white comedians may have influenced each other, but W. C. Fields and Eddie Cantor, who played on the same vaudeville bills as Bert Williams, both admired his work. Fields was quoted as calling him “the funniest man I ever saw,” and Cantor claimed that he learned his sense of timing from Williams.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, because vaudevillians were notorious for stealing jokes and copying material from each other, it is hard to imagine that some of this didn’t go on between the black and white comedians.

Although black performers emerging from the minstrelsy period went on to work in all the venues open to them: vaudeville houses, nightclubs, music halls—even Broadway shows in a few instances, by the 1920s, a new generation of comedians born after the turn of the century began seeking the limelight. They included people such as Mantan Moreland (born 1902); Lincoln Perry, known as Stepin Fetchit (1902); Loretta Mary Aiken, known as Moms Mabely (1894); Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham (1904); and Eddie “Rochester” Anderson (1905). Whether deliberately planned or not, the laughable, self-demeaning stage names they adopted allowed them to present themselves as innocuous figures of fun not to be taken seriously, and thus not likely to upset white audiences. This was important at a time when white anxieties were excited by the aggressive assertiveness of Jack Johnson, who became the first black heavyweight champion of the world and had the temerity to consort with white women in public. Furthermore, films such as *The Birth of a Nation* were also spreading the Ku Klux Klan view of blacks as a threat to white women, if not to all of white civilization.

The African American performers who came of age in the 1920s would spend most of the next thirty years suffering all of the insults and injustices associated with racism. Their work was mainly done in segregated theaters and nightclubs, and the few who found work in white venues, including films, were generally hired to reproduce the Sambo or Mammy stereotypes. On Broadway, however, an important exception was the success of all-black



musical comedy shows. One of the best known was *Shuffle Along*, written and performed by the young comedians Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Stiles in 1921. They followed this with another hit called *Runnin' Wild* in 1923. According to research by Darryl Littleton, Miller and Stiles also created the idea for the Amos 'n Andy radio show, which became an immediate success when it was performed by the white team of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll in 1928. Flournoy Miller later wrote material for the show in the 1940s.<sup>19</sup> Also noteworthy in this context is that although some of the boundaries for what was considered by whites to be acceptable black humor were loosening, it was still true in the 1930s and 1940s that black comedians could only deviate from the established patterns of stereotypes at their own risk, or in all-black venues. When playing the role of Jack Benny's servant Rochester on radio and TV, however, Eddie Anderson became one of the first black comedians who consistently got laughs by making fun of a white man.<sup>20</sup> Like Eddie Anderson, a number of other black comedians in the 1930s and 1940s played the stereotyped role of wise-cracking servants on radio shows and in films. In some cases they had to be coached in order to deliver their lines using the black vernacular dialect that whites had come to expect. Mel Watkins refers to this as the verbal equivalent of the black comedians who had to wear blackface makeup in vaudeville.<sup>21</sup> Along with all Americans of their generation, however, the African American performers who spanned the years from minstrelsy and vaudeville to television would eventually witness a comedy revolution when legally enforced racist practices finally began to be outlawed during the 1950s and 1960s.

## THE NEW AFRICAN AMERICAN COMEDY CULTURE

All authorities on popular culture and humor generally agree that our contemporary, "anything goes" form of standup comedy began with a handful of white and black performers who have been called "the rebel comedians of the 1950s and 1960s."<sup>22</sup> Their so-called "rebellion" involved a radical reversal in the style and focus of comedic material. Instead of relying on the familiar themes employed by mainstream stars such as Jack Benny and Bob Hope, who got laughs by appealing to social stereotypes, bits of slapstick, and mother-in-law jokes, the rebels began to get laughs by ridiculing the familiar social stereotypes and those foolish enough to believe they were true. They also would delight small avant-garde audiences by dwelling on previously unmentionable topics such as mixed race sex, masturbation, homosexuality, and the joys of smoking grass. As might be expected, this sort of critical, satiric humor, targeting established middle class social and political values, was not an immediate popular success. Respectable people were further dismayed by the casual conversational style in which performers like Lenny Bruce discussed

outrageously obscene material. In the mid- to late 1950s, such humor was generally performed in small, racially integrated venues—clubs, coffee houses, and bars—in big cities such as San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, attracting audiences of idealistic college students, artists, and intellectuals, most of whom shared the critical attitudes expressed by the comedians.

The leading white rebels were Mort Sahl, who delivered ironic monologues typically related to political and philosophical issues in the style of a thoughtful college professor, and Lenny Bruce, who ridiculed religion and law enforcement while celebrating drugs and sex—the kinkier the better—in the style of a black jazz musician or street hustler. In fact, black musicians, comedians, and hustlers were among his closest associates. He was sometimes called a white Negro, and “conveyed a comic *attitude* reflecting prominent aspects of genuine black American humor. He adopted the swagger and assertive impiety of the black hipster.”<sup>23</sup> About the same time (1957–1958) that Bruce was becoming a hit with large, integrated club audiences in San Francisco, black comics such as Nipsey Russell, George Kirby, and Slappy White were starting to do their acts for primarily white audiences. But, unlike Bruce, who forcefully ridiculed the prejudices of middle class whites, the black comedians had to be far more cautious about using material that might upset white audiences. Dick Gregory was the breakthrough black artist who would change all this.

After a record-breaking performance at Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Club in 1961, Gregory was written up in news magazines, invited on TV talk shows, and given a recording contract. In his autobiography, he explained that his success sprang from his discovery of something like a formula for the performance of anti-racist humor by African American comedians. It was necessary, he reasoned, to make audiences feel relaxed and secure and to get them on his side at the beginning of his act. So he would spend the first few minutes making jokes about himself with little or no references to race. Having once gained their confidence in this fashion, Gregory then challenged audiences by presenting an increasingly hard-edged series of stories and observations poking fun at racist stereotypes in a way that encouraged his listeners to laugh with him at the absurdities of prejudice.<sup>24</sup> Like many brilliant insights, this one sounds quite simple, but Gregory did not come to it easily. Born during the depression and raised in an impoverished area of St. Louis, he attended Southern Illinois University on an athletic scholarship before starting his stage career in small black Chicago nightclubs during the late 1950s. His breakthrough insight seems to have followed from having grown up and come of age in urban environments straddling the divide between traditional black culture and the dominant white society. In effect, his athletic skills, attractive appearance, and university experience, combined with his diverse background performing in small clubs and his quick verbal intelligence, made him an ideal crossover entertainer.

Dick Gregory in 1961.



*Photofest*

Although he later used his celebrity status to advocate for a variety of sociopolitical causes growing out of the civil rights movement, his contribution to the development of African American standup was profoundly important as well. Lenny Bruce could rivet audiences with his aggressive outlaw stage presence, presenting an angry, often obscene series of fantasies

and parodies directed against mainstream American institutions, but he was not someone most people would want to take to lunch. By contrast, by the time Dick Gregory had finished seducing and more or less gently introducing anti-racist humor to his audience, many of them would be ready to invite him home for Sunday dinner. It would be another decade or more before some young black comedians would come along and successfully adopt the hard-nosed, defiant style associated with Lenny Bruce. In the meantime, it was Gregory's outstanding success that cleared the way for an exciting new generation of black standup artists who would deliberately copy or spontaneously imitate his brilliant performance model.

The new wave included Godfrey Cambridge, Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, and, most significantly during the early and mid-sixties, Bill Cosby. Cambridge and Wilson followed the trail blazed by Dick Gregory and became mainstream sensations for awhile, whereas Richard Pryor's astonishing success did not set in until the 1970s. But, by the late sixties, Cosby had become the best-known black comedian in America. As Gerald Nachman put it, "Dick Gregory cracked the color line, Godfrey Cambridge crossed it, and Bill Cosby whited it out."<sup>25</sup>

All accounts indicate that Gregory and Cosby had very similar backgrounds. Cosby's relatively impoverished childhood in Philadelphia was like Gregory's in St. Louis. Like Gregory, he gained an athletic scholarship to college (Temple University) and then left college to start performing in bars and third-rate clubs, where his tall good looks and smart self confidence contributed to his reassuring stage presence. Cosby even began his career using jokes and anti-racist material he copied from Gregory. The similarity broke down, however, when Cosby and his agent and friends realized that hard-edged racial humor did not suit his stage persona. Instead, what worked best for him were monologues about the universal human comedy and stories and observations with no particular bearing on race or ethnicity that could resonate with almost anyone's range of experience. Furthermore, his performance style conveyed both a sense of confident authority and good-natured, charming decency to audiences (he had decided early on to work without using obscene language). If Gregory could seduce an audience, Cosby could charm them right out of their seats. After working in Greenwich Village clubs in 1962, he became a great hit on the Tonight Show in 1963 and then took on an unprecedented costarring role with a white actor in a dramatic TV series (*I Spy*) in 1965. The rest, as they say, is history.<sup>26</sup>

All in all, his qualities as a standup performer led some commentators to describe him as an African American version of Mark Twain, more of a philosophical storyteller than a comic. Commentators over the years have suggested that the TV and film performances of Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier, have probably done more to erode white prejudices than have any formal programs of education or integration. Cosby's career has had its ups

and downs as he moved from standup to dramatic roles in films and TV. As will be noted later, he became a major critic of comedians' use of obscene language and the infamous n-word. Oddly enough, Richard Pryor, who became the polar opposite of Bill Cosby, achieving wide fame while using obscenities throughout his act and referring to all blacks as niggers, began his career by trying to emulate Cosby's style and material. In the mid-sixties, he was even being publicized as the new Bill Cosby.<sup>27</sup>

*Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip, 1982.*



*Columbia Pictures/Photofest*

Richard Pryor eventually developed the creative voice and sensibility that revolutionized standup comedy in the 1970s, but no sign of this could be seen in either his background or his early nightclub act, patterned after Cosby. Born and primarily raised by his grandmother, who ran a brothel and boarding house in the black section of Peoria during the 1940s, he was a frail, sensitive child who grew up to be a quick-witted, smart-alecky teenager. A good part of his education was gained from listening to stories told by the itinerant characters who hung out in his grandmother's parlor. His formal education ended after he was expelled from high school for hitting a teacher. At eighteen, he joined the army, and after serving for two years, he began doing standup in small clubs in the Midwest. By 1963, his act was good enough to get him club dates in New York and then guest appearances on a TV variety show and on major talk shows. He later called the routines he was doing during this period "white bread humor," and his stage presence was a perfect fit. He would come on stage in a hesitant, rather timid fashion: a young, thin, short, black man looking a bit embarrassed to be the center of attention. It was the opposite of the confident Gregory and Cosby style, but it worked very well for him. Audiences were usually sympathetic and were all the more impressed after he strung them along to a clever punch line.

Even though the white bread humor brought him substantial success, he became increasingly disgusted with it, and with himself for doing it. The repressed anger and frustration he felt while going along with the expectations of white audiences and club managers began to show up in his act in the late sixties. An early example of his effort to find a more authentic comedic voice is the satiric routine called "Super Nigger" that appeared on his first record album in 1969. Once he found an authentic voice based on black ghetto street jargon and language rhythms—or at least what whites generally took to be the genuine elements of black ghetto culture—his career took off like a rocket. Much of his act was now based on his genius for acting out a wide range of character types, from redneck Southern sheriffs and teenage black drug addicts to the streetwise and philosophical old black man he called Mudbone. His parodies of middle-class whites, including their vocal tones and body language, never failed to break up white middle-class audiences as well as blacks.

Because of Pryor's subsequent success in other domains—he was a gifted comedy writer who wrote much of the script for the film *Blazing Saddles* with Mel Brooks, a popular starring actor in several Hollywood films, and the creator of brilliant one-man TV comedy concerts—his effect on the art of standup may not be appreciated. Fundamentally, and in many ways like Lenny Bruce, he violated most of the conventions that had previously restricted the style, subject matter, and language of standup, but he did this far more effectively than Bruce. His style rested on his exceptional

ability to create and convincingly act out characters in sustained comic narratives, and his subject matter extended over a wider range of racial and ethnic topics. Although his language was just as obscene as Bruce's, he went much further in his use of the previously forbidden n-word. Thus, before Pryor, it is hard to imagine that anyone would have thought of bringing out a record album with "nigger" in the title, yet in 1974 and 1976, respectively, he received Grammy Awards for albums titled *That Nigger's Crazy* and *Bicentennial Nigger*.<sup>28</sup>

All in all, it is almost impossible to exaggerate Pryor's effect on both black and white standup comedians. The field of standup comedy was never the same after him; to this day, every working comedian acknowledges a debt to his groundbreaking work. Apart from the notorious excesses and eccentricities of his personal life, however, the one cloud hanging over his legacy concerns "That Word." Pryor himself clearly had no particular qualms about referring to himself and other blacks as niggers; he had grown up with it, and when he began infusing his act with authentic racial humor, it became a potent means of enhancing comedic effects. Furthermore, its usage in the street between people of color was not always insulting. When soul singer James Brown was sometimes called "a straight up real nigger," it was said as a gesture of respect for his authentic personal style and assertion of racial pride. In his book devoted to "the strange career of a troublesome word," the African American scholar Randall Kennedy noted that nigger could also be used by African Americans as a token of affection, of comradeship, or as a defiant gesture against white prejudice.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, use of the word remains a hot point of contention among black comedians as well as African Americans in general. In the wake of Pryor's immense success, many black performers, and a few whites too, attempted to appropriate some of his charisma by frequently referring to "niggas" and "muthafuckas" in their routines. Others, such as Bill Cosby, were highly critical of this trend, and Pryor himself later vowed to never use the n-word in public. The controversy still festers, however. Within the larger show-biz community, whites and blacks generally agree that whites have no right to ever use the word. Furthermore, some black intellectuals and comedians argue that the word "belongs" to them—that it can be converted from an insult into a symbol of black pride or even a weapon against racism. Among most others, the prevailing attitude is less doctrinaire. Use of obscenities and the n-word depends on the situation, because, as most comedians have it, "anything goes as long as it's funny."

As Richard Pryor's career faded because of his health and emotional problems in the later 1970s, Eddie Murphy was already on his way to becoming "King Richard's" successor. While growing up in a middle class

family in Long Island N.Y., he was a “natural” family fun maker and class clown. In his mid-teens he lied about his age and began performing routines copied from Richard Pryor in local clubs. At age twenty, he began a three-year run on TV, (1981–1984) as a featured performer on Saturday Night Live, where he became famous for acting out parodies of celebrities and for creating comic characters. His standup comedy concerts featured a more aggressive, confrontational style than had previously been typical of African Americans. He would come on stage with bold, often obscene, in-your-face routines ridiculing women, homosexuals, politicians, and any other convenient targets. Murphy’s stance as a black performer was relatively unique and particularly attractive because he conveyed the impression of being immune and superior to any form of racism. It was as if he simply couldn’t be bothered wasting his time over anything as silly or ignorant as race prejudice—except to occasionally make fun of it. In general, his unusually forthright standup persona as a brash, street-smart, pretty tough black man not only brought a special delight to black audiences but also defined a new era for African American comedy. There had always been a sensitive streak of vulnerability lurking in Richard Pryor’s humor, but there was nothing of the sort to be seen in Eddie Murphy. After Murphy, standup performers were no longer concerned about coming on too strong in ways that might threaten whites. In this way, Eddie Murphy put the finishing touches on the assertive trend started by Richard Pryor while moving on to a movie career where he continued to portray strong and independent characters.<sup>30</sup> Between 1982 and 1989, he starred in seven major hit films, and his rise to Hollywood superstar status coincided with an explosive expansion of the standup universe.

## THE ROARING EIGHTIES

Author and comedian Darryl Littleton did not exaggerate when he noted that “In the late ’80s to mid-’90s everybody and his grandmother tried to be stand-up comedians, and the era came to be known as the ‘black comedy boom.’<sup>31</sup> Comedy clubs and other venues for professional and amateur standup performers began opening up all over the country, and TV was not far behind with offerings such as *Def Comedy Jam*, *In Living Color*, and shows on Black Entertainment Television. Because of the sheer profusion of talented black standup artists emerging during this period, discussion must be limited to those who have stood the test of time and apparently had the greatest effect on the public and on other performers. They include Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Rock, Keenan Ivory and Damon Wayans, and Martin Lawrence. Along with a handful of others, such as Arsenio Hall, Robert Townsend, and Bernie Mac, these artists



can be seen as having formed a critical mass of creative energy during the late eighties and early nineties that propelled standup comedy to the forefront of popular entertainment in America. And it is surely no accident that all of them are members of the sophisticated generation of black youths that came of age in the wake of the civil rights and integration struggles of the 1960s.<sup>32</sup>

It was 1957, for example, when eight-year-old Caryn Johnson, who would become Whoopi Goldberg, began her acting career in children's theater productions in New York. She grew up performing in a variety of small acting roles and working in improvisational drama and comedy groups. Her big break came when, almost by accident, she had to go on stage alone in a comedy club and act out the roles of different characters in a comedy sketch. It was surprisingly successful, and she proceeded to develop a portfolio of seemingly stereotyped characters—a drug addict, a valley girl, a West Indian maid, and so on—acting them out in comic monologues with unusual sympathetic twists in a one-woman show featured on HBO in 1985. The show, a sensational hit, came to define a new form of sustained, theatrical standup. There were criticisms from some comedians who saw it as more theater than standup. But it seems absurd to question the genuine standup status of someone who can get up alone on an empty stage and be funny for more than an hour. Whoopi also stands out as the single most prominent African American female comedian. Although Moms Mabley achieved national recognition toward the end of her career, her opportunities for wide exposure earlier on had been limited by segregation, and she never approached the superstar status of Whoopi Goldberg. There are certainly a number of talented young black women doing standup today, but as yet none of them has gained wide national recognition.<sup>33</sup>

Chris Rock exemplifies the by-now familiar sequence of success for standup artists: from small to larger club venues, then to theater concerts and TV, and finally to the movies. He was barely twenty-one years old and doing standup in New York clubs when Eddie Murphy saw his work and recommended him to perform in an HBO special. During the early nineties he became a comedy writer and performer on *Saturday Night Live*, and his major success leading to his career in Hollywood was an award-winning one-man HBO concert in 1996. His style of comedy has been described as a cross between Richard Pryor and George Carlin—that is, a mixture of hard-edged satire, spiced up with the usual n- and mf-words, and more intellectual, whimsical observations on the peculiar behaviors of human beings. A good deal of his act was often focused on the self-defeating activities of young African Americans. In this context, he became famous for the line “I love black people, but I hate niggas.” He would go on to act in more TV specials and sitcoms and

in supporting and starring roles in movies, also hosting the 2005 Academy Awards.<sup>34</sup>

## NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN STANDUP

Starting in the late 1990s, African American standup began moving in a number of new directions. Some of these were simply matters of presentation, as when producer Walter Latham realized that instead of having a single superstar comedian performing on stage of an hour or more, it might work just as well to have four or five of them take turns doing fifteen minutes or so of their best material. Organized as a road show called the *Kings of Comedy*, comedians Steve Harvey, D. L. Hughey, Bernie Mac, and Cedric the Entertainer toured theaters around the country. In some respects, their show was reminiscent of the way performers toured on the old vaudeville circuits, and its success attracted Spike Lee to film the show, which was shown as an HBO concert in 2000. The pattern was repeated with women comedians—Laura Hayes, Mo’Nique, Sommore, and Adele Givens—who formed the group called *Queens of Comedy* in 2000 and 2001. The *Queens* were also successful on the road and in an HBO film but failed to gain the same celebrity as the *Kings*.<sup>35</sup>

The career of Keenan Ivory Wayans represents yet another new development in the field of African American standup. In this case, it involved both a new TV show venue and, perhaps more important, control over production of the show. Wayans’s success seemed to come easily. After graduating from the Tuskegee Institute, he began doing standup in comedy clubs in New York in the mid-1980s and collaborated with Robert Townsend writing comedy scripts for films and TV. His standup career was soon put aside in favor of writing assignments for Eddie Murphy, and work on an original movie. The comic film *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka* was his first independent project, released in 1988. It was partly on the basis of this achievement that during the same year, producer, director, and starring actor Wayans was able to develop, produce, and star in his TV comedy show *In Living Color*, which consisted of a series of bizarrely funny, often outrageous skits involving stock characters played by himself, his brothers Damon and Shawn, and his sister Kim. Jamie Foxx, Jim Carrey, Chris Rock, and other rising comedians also gained exposure on the show, which remained a Fox channel hit for several years. Keenan and his brother Damon both went on to major Hollywood careers as actors, writers, and producers, but the larger significance of Keenan Ivory Wayans came about because of his status as the prototype for a new generation of black standup comedians who would become film and TV entrepreneurs.<sup>36</sup>

This career pattern, whereby successful comedians were able to transcend their performance careers and move into more central creative roles

*In Living Color*, 1990–1994. Shown: (back row) Jim Carrey, Tommy Davidson, Kelly Coffield, Damon Wayans, (front row) Anne-Marie Johnson, Keenen Ivory Wayans, T'Keyah Keymáh, Kim Wayans, David Alan Grier.



FOX/Photofest

as producers, directors, and writers, was already visible in some of the activities of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy. But, whereas they remained primarily performers, Keenan Ivory Wayans has become a near-full-time entertainment entrepreneur, and his success has decisively shattered the tradition of white producers, managers, and directors controlling the careers of black performers. A similar progression from standup success to the development and executive production of movies and TV shows can be seen among other black performers. On the strength of their bankable popularity, Martin Lawrence, Chris Rock, Bernie Mac, Jamie Foxx, and others have been able to gain an unprecedented degree of independent power in Hollywood. The same has been true of Dave Chappelle, who apparently chose, however, to move outside mainstream comedy while pushing the boundaries of standup in radical new directions.

Like Eddie Murphy, Chappelle began doing standup as a young teenager and, while later studying acting in Washington D.C. in the 1980s, performed in a number of local clubs. Subsequent to various film roles and TV appearances in the 1990s, and a successful HBO special in 2000, he developed his own TV series, *Chappelle's Show*, for the Comedy Central channel. The sketches played out on the show were bold, quirky satires that brought him both fame and notoriety. In one controversial sketch, *The*

*Dave Chappelle: For What It's Worth, 2004.*



*Showtime/Photofest*

*Nigger Family*, he tried to detoxify the n-word by showing its absurdity, but not everyone appreciated the ironic humor built into this satire on racist language. In another, Chappelle conceived a scenario in which the future could be foretold via the prophecies of a “Negrodamus.” He also performed a scenario demonstrating the inhibitions imposed on middle-class blacks by their sensitivity to stereotypes, as exemplified in refusals to order fried chicken or watermelon in the presence of whites. This sort of material attracted a great deal of attention by simultaneously ridiculing the

preconceptions of both blacks and whites. But in order to “get it,” audiences had to be knowledgeable enough to recognize the often double-edged implications of the action. Then there was perhaps the boldest of Chappelle’s satires, a piece analogous to “theater of the absurd,” in which a blind black man becomes the leader of a white supremacist organization. It should not be surprising, therefore, that some whites and many African Americans who tended to focus on the superficial aspects of these skits—the mix of white and black racist attitudes and language they contained—began to criticize Chappelle for encouraging the prejudices his work was actually designed to ridicule.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the show was a great success until Chappelle abruptly quit in the spring of 2005 to spend several months on a personal retreat in South Africa. His subsequent comments suggest that he had experienced a type of midlife crisis brought on by overwork and anxiety about the meaning of his work. By 2006, he was back in the States, appearing on diverse talk shows, performing standup concerts, and planning new film and TV projects.<sup>38</sup>

Chappelle’s recent career seems particularly significant because of his remarkable success and his current dominance over leading-edge black standup humor (Darryl Littleton has called him “the hottest comedian in the world”). Noteworthy too is his career’s echoing that of his forebear Richard Pryor. Like Pryor, Chappelle has been a pioneer, extending the frontiers of standup to controversial new ground and gaining applause from many but sharp criticism from others for his n-word parodies of some black culture patterns. Also like Pryor, his edgy innovations have cost him a great deal of emotional stress leading to an existential crisis (Pryor took refuge in drugs; Chappelle found a better way by retreating to Africa). But he now seems to have found his way past this and has resisted big-money offers to work in the mainstream entertainment industry. Instead, he has returned to performing standup to live audiences, trying out new formats and styles of humor that can be complex and yet readily accessible. It remains to be seen whether he will keep on exploring new directions, but at the end of 2007, there seems no doubt that Chappelle defines the leading edge of African American standup.

## CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

Regardless of how standup comedy may develop in the future, it should be plain to any reader of this chapter that much of the contemporary significance of African American standup lies in its rags to riches history. This history has been nothing less than an outstanding against-the-odds national success story. No performance art in America has ever started lower or risen higher in the space of 150 years. And its movement into

mainstream culture could not have happened unless African American standup humor had important value for *all* Americans. The most obvious value is simply the gift of laughter. This hardly needs any elaboration but to acknowledge that although some of the laughter may have been a disdainful manifestation of white racist attitudes, it is also only fair to suggest that among whites as well as blacks, a great deal of the laughter has been sympathetic in the past as it clearly is today. One merely has to observe the reactions of a mixed audience at, say, a Chris Rock concert to recognize that their reflexive bursts of laughter relate mainly to universal human frailties rather than racist attitudes.

A perennial question about the value of black standup comedy to African Americans centers on whether it helps or harms "the race." Influential middle- and upper-class blacks and whites, including Bill Cosby, have argued that by their use of the n-word and their exploitation of racist stereotypes, standup artists from Richard Pryor to Dave Chappelle have either supported race prejudices, profited from them, or made it seem "cool" to use insulting, hurtful language. The fact that these performers have been immensely popular among most African Americans has not convinced their critics to relent. Nor has the fact that it is more or less impossible to ridicule racist attitudes and stereotypes without mentioning and dramatizing them. But, setting aside the criticisms of the few, other values are associated with black standup that can hardly be questioned. It has, for example, clearly served an important social function by demonstrating how humor can provide any minority group, whether black, Hispanic, Asian, gay, Native American, or feminist, a way to vividly express their anxieties and frustrations. This can be most obviously seen in the rising number of diverse ethnic comedians who essentially use the standup paradigm developed by African Americans. Indeed, a good case can be made for the view that almost from their beginning, African American standup and other varieties of humor have often been the means whereby African Americans, and later other minorities as well, have been able to "speak truth to power" and to themselves.<sup>39</sup>

But truth can be a dangerous thing if people are not prepared to accept it. Black standup routines that invite audiences to laugh at themselves by presenting parodies of either black or white racist stereotypes can provoke anger rather than amusement if they aren't carefully calculated. Yet sociologists point out that such material can be particularly valuable to other African Americans. Thus, shared humor within a group, even when critical, tends to encourage group cohesion and morale. Self-critical laughter can be a healthy way to release social and emotional tensions, and parodies of stereotypes can be instructive by warning group members about the prejudices they are likely to encounter.<sup>40</sup>

No discussion of African American standup would be complete without paying tribute to the courage and creativity of its performers. All comedians,

even those who perform conventional mainstream comedy, must accept the risks of public failure—the experience of what they call “flop sweat.” But the risks have been far greater for black standup artists who have always had to perform under the shadow of implicit or explicit racism. When getting started, they have typically had to operate as road warriors, living by their wits as they moved from one club date to another. Nor could they be confident that a drunk would not suddenly pop up, shouting racial obscenities—or that whatever routine played well in Peoria would also play well in Philadelphia. And the risks have been still greater for the more creative performers who, from the days of minstrelsy to the present, have been pushing the boundaries of standup in new directions. To understand all this is also to understand why many performers fall by the wayside, undone by the stress they must endure or by the alcohol and other drugs that provide short-term relief from the stress. The challenge of performing standup is no small thing, and those who persist to finally achieve some lesser or greater degree of success fully deserve whatever rewards and respect may come their way.

## NOTES

1. Preface to Ronald Lande Smith's *The Stars of Stand-up Comedy*, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986).

2. Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950's and 1960's* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

3. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humor: From Antiquity to the Present day* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997), xi.

4. See the Bremmer chapter, “Jokes, Jokers, and Jokebooks in Ancient Greek Culture,” 11–28, and the Fritz Graf chapter, “Cicero, Plautus and Roman Laughter,” 29–39, both in Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Humor*; this anthology also includes a valuable research bibliography on humor and history by Johan Verberckmoes, 242–252.

5. See Guy Halsall, “Funny Foreigners: Laughing with the Barbarians in Late Antiquity,” 89–113, and Mark Humphries, “The Lexicon of Abuse: Drunkenness and Political Illegitimacy in the Late Roman World,” 75–88, both in Guy Halsall, ed., *Humor, History, and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); see also Robert Garland, “The Mockery of the Deformed and Disabled in Graeco-Roman Culture,” in Siegfried Jakel and Asko Timonen, eds., *Laughter Down the Centuries*, Vol. 1. (Turku, Finland: Abo Academis Tryckeri, 1994), 71–84.

6. Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 63–65.

7. Halsall, *Humor, History and Politics*, 19.

8. Bronislaw Geremek, “The Marginal Man,” in Jacques LeGoff, ed., *The Medieval World*, trans. L. G. Cochrane (London: Collins and Brown, 1990), 347–373; see also Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 418.

9. Watkins, *On The Real Side*, 66; see also Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), 7–15.

10. Gilbert Osofsky, *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Nothrup* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

11. Hughes and Meltzer, *Black Magic*, 18. Their useful work describes the slave songs and dances, as well as how slaves made their own banjos and percussion instruments. Sketches, paintings, and photos of the better-known slave entertainers and later minstrel-show performers also feature largely in this book.

12. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 86–95.

13. Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: the Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 85–92.

14. Hughes and Meltzer, *Black Magic*, 27.

15. *Ibid.*, 67.

16. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 156, 179.

17. *Ibid.*, 164–180.

18. *Ibid.*, 175, 179.

19. Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African Americans Taught us to Laugh* (New York: Applause Theater and Cinema Books, 2006), 33–34. Littleton accurately sums up this period, noting: “The comedians of the day, though still in minstrel attire in many cases, were moving more toward authentic black humor while simultaneously keeping white audiences comfortable with the familiar image of the coon.” (34)

20. *Ibid.*, 52.

21. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 292–293.

22. Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

23. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 485–486.

24. Gregory, *Nigger* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964).

25. Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 563.

26. *Ibid.*, 563–590; see also Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 503–508; Phil Berger, *The Last Laugh* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 133; Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, 105.

27. For this and all the following material on Richard Pryor, I have drawn primarily on the works of Nachman, Littleton, and Watkins, noted above, and Phil Berger, *The Last Laugh: the World of the Stand-up Comics* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989).

28. See my discussion of the similarities and parallels between the lives and careers of Bruce and Pryor in Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: the Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2005), 71–80.

29. Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002.)

30. Watkins, *On The Real Side*, 563–565.

31. Littleton, *Black Comedians*, 187.

32. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 565.

33. Mary Unterbrink, *Funny Women: American Comediennes, 1860–1985* (Jefferson North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1987), 206–208; for more general perspectives



on women in comedy, see Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave, *Women in Comedy: Funny Ladies From the Turn of the Century to the Present* (Secaucus NJ: Citadel Trade, 1986).

34. Littleton, *Black Comedians*, 256–258.

35. Ibid., 276–277.

36. Ibid., 227–228; see also biographical sketch on <http://www.starpulse.com>.

37. Ibid., 308–313; see also biographical sketch on <http://www.starpulse.com>.

38. Details available on the Chappelle Web page: <http://www.davechappelle.com>.

39. Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 566–570.

40. Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines*, 35–36.

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